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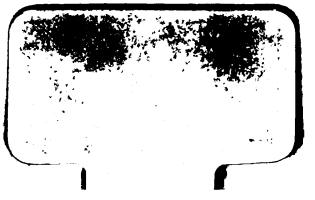

THE MARSTONS.

THE MARSTONS.

A Novel.

(REPRINTED FROM FRASER'S MAGAZINE.)

BY

HAMILTON AÏDÉ.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE MARSTONS.

CHAPTER I.

AN EVENING PARTY.

THE Caerlavrock and Dumberly clans were to be gathered together, at the sounding of Mrs. Pomfret's clarion, on the Thursday evening to which she had referred. It was to begin with a great banquet, after which Mrs. Pomfret was "to receive" a large, but chosen circle, composed of all her new acquaintances, and none of her old friends. Nor had these any right to complain; the Yellowlys, and Miss Turkaine, and the Bagshots, and all that set, had been duly fed; and would have been quite "out of their element on this occasion," as Mrs. Pomfret expressed it, when Mary pleaded

for some old playmate of hers, whose lines had not fallen in fashionable places.

Olivia was the only exception to this; and her, Mrs. Pomfret begged as a favour to leave her solitude up-stairs and be present. For Lady Caerlavrock had talked so much of her beauty when she saw her one morning, and Lady Helena had conceived such a girlish enthusiasm about her, and Lord Dumberly himself had asked with such curiosity to see this Miss Marston, and had even invited her (through Mrs. Pomfret) to his concert, that there was every reason for having Olivia to add an *éclat* to the evening. People who meet night after night are grateful for a new face to discuss; it is very small talk, perhaps, but it is universal; from the highest to the lowest, from the profound politician to the shallowest fool, it is the one subject upon which all have an opinion, and none are afraid to give it.

The banquet was not nearly such a solemn and awful business as Olivia had expected from Mrs. Pomfret's condition beforehand. They were all naturally well-bred people; at least, they appeared so on this occasion. Olivia detected now and then a smile, which got no further than the eyes, upon one or two faces when poor Mrs. Pomfret gave vent to some of her inflated common-places, and strove to suit her company by being very

grand; but old Pomfret himself was so entirely without pretension, so simple and kindly, that it was impossible that any one, even in his sleeve, could laugh at *him*. Lord Dumberly had his little jests with Kate and Mary across the table (the wit would not bear transporting any further, but by the girls' mirth you would have supposed it was Sydney Smith himself); in short, all these great people were at their ease, and laughed and talked pleasantly, not at all as if they were assisting at an appalling function. It was this being at their ease which struck Olivia as the chief point of difference between the guests round Mr. Pomfret's board to-day, and most of those whom she remembered in the old Fordingham days. The women had not that intense consciousness of wearing smart gowns which paralyses all power of being pleasant; and the men, who were probably not a whit cleverer than the Yellowly and Bagshot race, had a light-in-hand way of discussing every topic under the sun, which contrasted pleasantly with the ponderous manner in which, at those Fordingham dinners, a subject used to be boarded, and never abandoned, till it was left a wreck. Julian's plastic powers of conversation, even his free-and-easy style in general society, which chafed Rupert so much, had shone agreeably in Olivia's eyes formerly beside the starched dulness of the other men;

and now, by an odd accident, she found herself seated next to a young clerk in the Foreign Office, whose general tone reminded her not a little of Westbrook. He observed, after dinner, to his cousin, Lord Dumberly's second son, before they joined the ladies, that the girl in black—the new beauty—was unlike any woman he had ever met; twice during dinner, when he had spoken to her, she had not heard him. There was a weariness, too, about her expression, every now and then, very strange in a girl of two or three and twenty, who had never been out in London before. Poor Olivia! Her thoughts, at those moments, were far distant, and with a very different sort of person; moved, perhaps, by the force of some half-unconscious comparison between the pleasure to be derived from the fashionable youth's conversation, and that of a man beside whom she had never felt one single moment's weariness. Yet the attaché had the good taste not to talk of people and entertainments about which Olivia knew nothing: he spoke glibly of Italy and Spain, of the opera, and the last new novel, much as Westbrook might have done; and she remembered with astonishment how pleasant she had once thought *him*. But she did not know that had her neighbour been twice as agreeable, she would not have found him so; for her heart and mind were too heavy with other matters.

The ladies had scarcely reached the drawing-room, when some of those who were probably bound to two or three balls further on in the evening began to arrive. Olivia got into a corner of the back drawing-room behind the grand piano, the tail of which was turned out into the room in honour of the musical entertainment which Mrs. Pomfret had provided. From this post Olivia could see every one who entered, and nearly all that went on in the two rooms, without being herself conspicuous; Lady Helena presently joined her.

The plot thickened: then arrived a sprinkling of men. Mrs. Pomfret, the more onerous duties of the banquet being over, became lighter-hearted, and smiled with less of anxiety and of crushing importance as she greeted her guests. Then came in a bearded beauty—such a beauty that, Lady Helena said, women were supposed to have looked at him, and died straightway. This was the famous baritone, Degl' Occhi, now a little dyed and generally the worse for wear, and, consequently, less dangerous to introduce into the bosom of a family than he was some fifteen years back, when he used to sigh and say, "È una disgrazia di esser così bello." Now he could with more safety be permitted to teach young ladies, and to sing at evening parties; and he was to sing to-night with Madame Stelliño, who had not yet come, but

"made herself to be desired," as the Italians expressively phrase it.

The men now sauntered up from the dining-room. Some of them stuck on the landing or in the doorway, after the manner of Englishmen; but Lord Dumberly, as befitted his position, came handsomely to the front, with the wig and double eye-glass so familiar about town, and stood by Mrs. Pomfret while she received; Mr. Pomfret sneaking behind on the stairs, I am grieved to say, with some of the recusants. Henry, however, was of course not among them; he quickly found out his Helena's corner, and persuaded her to give him a small bit of her ottoman, whereby the beautiful sweep of her dress was destroyed, and Olivia was deprived of her bright, amusing little companion, who now became engrossed by her other neighbour.

Presently there was a little stir at the door; the crowd round it was too great for Olivia to see who entered, but a footman laid a roll of music on the piano, and Lord Dumberly's voice was heard crying out, "Ah! we've been looking anxiously for you." Then Olivia knew it must be Madame Stellino. The crowd parted to enable the singer to make her way to the piano, and Olivia saw before her Clara Elliston.

She was, if possible, prettier than a year ago:

but before her piercing eyes had travelled to the obscure corner behind the piano—for she was still talking to Lord Dumberly, who had followed her —Olivia had time to notice an important change in the singer's general appearance and manner. She was neatly but inexpensively dressed in half-mourning, without ornaments of any kind, and her demeanour was that of the most subdued, modest, and shrinking widow whom stern necessity ever drove to sing before an enthusiastic public. She acted the part to such perfection, that had Olivia known her less well she would have been deceived. Her eyes shyly drooped at his lordship's flowery compliments, her deprecating smile, her sweet fluttering little answers, and half-sad, half-frightened glances round her every now and then — here was a contrast to the childish audacity, garrulity, and unconcealed vanity of the Clara whom Olivia had known! What, together with her change of name, did it all mean? Olivia could scarcely help smiling at the little comedy before her; but it was a smile that had no pleasure in it.

Suddenly Clara's eye caught hers.

She coloured up to the roots of her hair, and sprang forward, leaving Lord Dumberly standing, a good deal surprised, and not altogether pleased, at being left thus, after his marked condescension.

"My dear, *dear* Olivia! How delighted I am to see you once more! What an age it is since we parted! And to meet with a real, *true* friend in the midst of the cold and heartless throng, who know nothing of all one's troubles, and only care for the amusement one can give them—oh! what a real joy it is!"

She seized both her hands; and had she not been in society, I think the ready tears would have come.

Lady Helena looked up in astonishment, and so did Henry.

All the response which Olivia could persuade herself to make to this effusion was:

"Thank you, Clara, I am as much surprised as you are; not the least expecting, when I heard of Madame Stellino, to see *you*."

"It never occurred to you, then, that it was but a transposition of the letters of my name? I found that as long as I stuck to the English arrangement of those letters, I should never get on. Oh! I've got so much to tell you, dear. You know that poor Aunt Crosbie is gone?"

"No, indeed I did not. I am very sorry, Clara. How do you get on alone? I hope you have some one——"

"Ah! I know what you mean. No, I have no one to take care of me; but then, you know, I

am so much changed, dear! and I have given up the stage entirely."

"I'm very glad to hear it, but how came that about? You were so devoted to it a year ago."

"It was Aunt Crosbie's dying request, to begin with, that unless I married again (which it is very unlikely that I shall ever do)"—here she looked down, and sighed—"I should never sing again on the stage. It was a great deprivation to me, but I suppose it *was* best. People *will* talk so. And I find now I shall make much more by concerts and lessons, than I did by opera singing at small theatres. Since Lord Dumberly's party, I have had more engagements offered me than I can accept."

"He met you in the country, I think? You have not been long in London?"

"Only two or three weeks. I was singing at Bath, when Lord Dumberly heard me, and told me to come to London, and that he could get me engagements, he thought. And two or three families promised me lessons, and so I came. Before that, I had been staying about in country-houses, teaching for a fortnight or three weeks at a time in different families, ever since Aunt Crosbie's death, last December. Oh! I am very much changed, dear! I am become such a sober, sedate person, you wouldn't know me."

Olivia thought she did. Degl' Occhi came up, and touching Clara on the arm with a roll of music, told her they were waiting for her to begin. She squeezed Olivia's hand, took the music from him, and turned to the piano.

It was one of those long boisterous duets, which may be indicative of anything under the sun, except love and tranquillity; and it was very energetically sung. The first movement was like a succession of loud thunder claps, as the antagonistic forces rolled up, and met each other with repeated shocks; the second movement resembled the rush and scurry of the pitiless storm that follows. It was not the sort of music that Olivia cared for; and it seemed to her that Clara's voice had lost something of its roundness; but then a whole year's singing, at full stretch, must impair the most beautiful organ, and Clara had not yet learnt the cunning mastery of resources which enables the artist to spare himself: she was always at full stretch. In other respects, her singing was much improved; and intense as ever was her passionate earnestness, infusing a vitality even into this trashy music. The applause was enthusiastic, led by Lord Dumberly, and followed up by young and old alike.

"Quite carries one away!"

"There's something in her high notes——!"

"And then, so charming to watch her! She *is* so pretty, and so modest, and sweet-looking! Nothing flaunty or bold, like many of those sort of people."

"It's my opinion that Patti can't hold a candle to her." This came from a young life-guardsman, who in virtue of a stall at Covent Garden twice a week, considered himself an authority. A languid lady near him looked up from her seat in the doorway, and murmured—

"Quite the music of the spheres, don't you think?"

Whether the life-guardsman committed himself to an opinion on this point, I am not sure; but one thing was clear, that the verdict of the room upon the new singer was unanimous. After that, Degl' Occhi might roar out "Il Balen," with all the conventional spasmodic expression proper to the villain of an opera, but hardly any one listened to him. They had looked upon his stony beauty, and listened to his brassy voice for many seasons, now; and the voice was no longer "the voice of the charmer." Poor fellow: this fair little woman, who was new, and whose face was as lovely as her voice, occupied all eyes and all tongues. She sat very quietly by the piano, looking up into the baritone's face, while he sang, apparently absorbed, and unconscious that she was the subject of general

enthusiasm. A little more elation would have better pleased Olivia. She could not believe in either the diffidence, or the indifference. It all seemed to her overdone; but then, she acknowledged that she was prejudiced. After all, why should there not be that genuine change in Clara, which Olivia had tried so often to effect? Ought she not to rejoice in the subdued demeanour which seemed to imply that Madame Stellino was, in fact, quite another person to Mrs. Elliston? Olivia felt that perhaps she was uncharitable: but her convictions as to Clara were not easily to be shaken.

Madame Stellino was now to sing a solo. She turned over the roll of music in her hand, still sitting, and leaning across to the accompanyist at the piano, to discuss which of two songs she should choose. Half the eyes in the room, Olivia's included, were fixed on her; and her own never betrayed that she knew it by so much as a furtive glance round.

Suddenly—her eyes were still upon the music—she started, and turned pale. She bent her head still lower, so that her face was almost hidden, but Olivia saw that the roll in her hand shook.

"I am afraid she is ill," said Lady Helena to Olivia.

Olivia did not reply. Clara had raised her head, and, save that her fingers twitched nervously

at the music, all trace of emotion was gone. Some one was talking and laughing rather above the rest of the voices in the doorway between the two rooms. Almost unconsciously, Olivia looked up; and she needed not then to be told what had moved Clara.

There, talking to Lord Dumberly, stood Julian Westbrook.

Clara never once turned her eyes in that direction. The voice which smote upon her singularly sharp ears was enough. No doubt she had long foreseen the probability of such meeting, and was, in a measure, prepared. But it needed, nevertheless, some courage when it came with a hundred eyes upon her. Olivia's compassion was once more roused, heightened, I think, by indignation against the man towards whom, when they last met, she had felt so very differently. Her own cheek went red and white, she knew, as she looked at him. The handsome face had lost all attraction for her. How could she ever have liked it? she asked herself, almost with disgust.

He did not see her yet, and she had time to think in what way she should meet him. To a consummate actress, like Clara, it might be easy enough, but not to Olivia. How could she endure any return to the tone of intimacy which had existed two years ago? And if she received him

as her own feelings prompted, how was she, whose lips were sealed, to justify this change to Mrs. Pomfret? In this house, above all, the position was a difficult one.

The prelude to Clara's song was now being played, and she rose, fixing her eyes steadily, as she did so, upon the folding-doors opposite. They never quivered, nor turned aside. In excitement, the pupils always contracted, and they burnt now, like specks of green fire, wonderful in radiance and intensity. Against the sill of that doorway Westbrook leant, examining her with a cool, scrutinising curiosity, much as he would have done by any other new star who had sprung up. To Olivia, who alone of all present knew the link that bound those two, it was a strange sight to watch.

The song was from the *Traviata;* the air which the wretched woman sings after she has consummated her sacrifice and is insulted by her lover. The room applauded Clara's effective singing of this; Olivia alone knew how much the woman's own heart probably went along with the passionate utterance of these words.

It was over; and Westbrook edged his way dexterously through chairs and crinolines to Olivia's corner. He passed close to Clara; his sleeve brushed her elbow. She shivered, and half

turned round; whereupon, he murmured the apology which good breeding demanded of a stranger, and passed on.

"I hope Miss Marston has not forgotten me, though it is nearly two years since we met?"

It was said in the peculiarly low soft voice he could use with such effect on occasion. He looked that she should hold out her hand: she only bowed.

"No, I have not forgotten you, Mr. Westbrook." But he was not disconcerted; it was very natural she should think he had forgotten *her*, and resent it.

"I can assure you it has not been my fault that I have not seen you in the interval, Miss Marston. Every one seems to have conspired to keep your residence a mystery. At Fordingham they could only give me your brother's address. Your brother, when I met him, declined telling me whether you were in London or not. Miss Pringle was equally mysterious, though I went to an evening party at her house, in the fallacious hope of meeting you. The Pomfrets when I saw them in Paris really knew nothing of you; so you see every clue I had failed me; and I came to the conclusion—very unwillingly, I assure you—that you did not wish your retirement to be invaded."

"You were right in that conclusion." She hesitated whether she should say more; but thought it better to add: "There were circumstances which made it desirable that in our seclusion we should not be subject to visitors."

"I am sincerely sorry," he said, gravely, "to find the sad cause which has freed you from this necessity to exclude your friends; and I hope now that——"

It angered her to hear him even allude to her dear father. She cut him short with the words:

"My *friends*, Mr. Westbrook, are few. Of course, as long as I am in this house I must see all Mrs. Pomfret's visitors. I expect none, myself."

There was a pause; Westbrook leant a little forwarder, and said:

"I am distressed to find that you receive me in so hostile a spirit. I was in hopes that you wouldn't have allowed your brother's prejudices to influence you so completely as I see they do."

"My brother has been in the West Indies and in California for the last sixteen months. I think your name was never mentioned between us but once since I last saw you. He then told me he had met you in the street."

"But some one has been prejudicing you, Miss

Marston; I see it in your manner. Do you remember the last conversation we had at that dance of the Pomfrets'? I do not know that you thought well of me then; I believe even then you'd been listening to all sorts of stories about me; but, at least, your manner was very different to what it now is."

"I am two years older, and I hope less foolish than I then was. At all events, I know more of the world, Mr. Westbrook."

"I must regret that knowledge if it makes you harder, less indulgent than you used to be. Do you know," he added, in a yet lower voice, "that I left Paris by a mid-day train, to-day, in consequence of a letter from Henry, in which he mentioned that you were staying here?"

Olivia's grey eyes looked at him, and through him, with an expression he found it impossible to translate.

"I am sorry for it," she said.

"Has Henry been telling you any nonsense about ——" he began quickly, and stopped short.

"About *whom?*"

He now felt certain that she had heard of his Paris flirtation. That accounted for it all. The only course was to take the bull by the horns.

"About Lady Harriet Tower. Really and truly it is the greatest nonsense in the world. I

can assure you there's nothing in it; only you know how people gossip and exaggerate. But I'm wrong. You do *not* know that it's next to impossible for a man mixing much in the world to escape scandal. If he is friends with a married woman, all sorts of things are immediately said. I'm a great friend of General Tower's, and Lady Harriet is a nice little thing—very insignificant—but a good little woman, and I was a great deal there; whereupon, all my good-natured friends set afloat stories which have actually no foundation."

"I don't suppose that if they had any you would exactly confide in me, Mr. Westbrook," said Olivia, with infinite scorn in her manner. "And as I never heard of Lady Harriet before, it is quite superfluous to rebut any stories about her to me."

He could have bitten his tongue out; the position, however, was lost; there was no recovering it.

They were beginning a duet. Olivia leaned back against the wall. Julian took a vacant chair near her. She felt immensely relieved when, at the close of the music, Henry called out,

"Julian, I want to introduce you to Lady Helena; my cousin, Mr. Westbrook;" and Olivia saw herself freed for at least some time to come. Lady Helena was fond of talking, and she soon engaged Julian in an animated conversation.

"What do you think of the new singer?" Olivia heard her ask.

"A very pretty woman, and sings with a great deal of expression—almost too much so; a little *tiré par les cheveux*, all that passion."

Clara, who had been watching Olivia for some time without appearing even to glance that way, now approached once more. Not only had she completely regained her self-command; she looked flushed and triumphant; probably in a great measure with the consciousness that *he* witnessed the enthusiasm of all these great people about her. But even now she was true to her part; the triumph was only betrayed by the eye and the cheek; the manner was still diffident and pleading rather than that of a successful prima donna.

"Dearest Olivia!" she exclaimed, raising her voice into that clear silvery distinctness which penetrated much further than louder voices, "I am so delighted to think we shall see each other constantly now. Mrs. Pomfret has just told me that I am to give her youngest daughter lessons twice a week."

Julian heard every word of this—as he was meant to do. He stared and frowned at the speaker, and lost the thread of what Lady Helena was saying.

"How came it," whispered Clara to Olivia,

later in the evening, as she was wishing her good night, "how came it that you never told me you knew *him*?"

"You never asked me," replied Olivia.

As Westbrook strolled along Piccadilly to the Albany that night he murmured to himself,

"So they are intimate, are they? Confound it. That is a disagreeable coincidence. Not that *she* can have told her anything. She couldn't be such a fool; when she has everything in the world to lose, and nothing to gain by peaching against herself. But it is awkward, and may disconcert my plans. She is such a spiteful, unforgiving little devil, that Clara. Deuced pretty she looked, to be sure; and the modest, unassuming dodge becomes her very well. She has managed her affairs very cleverly. I shouldn't wonder if she catches old Dumberly. I suppose that's her game."

CHAPTER II.

A DISCOVERY.

"EVERYTHING has gone off *most* satisfactorily," said Mrs. Pomfret, sitting down with a sigh of satisfaction, and the consciousness of well-merited repose, as the last carriage drove from the door. "That Madame Stellino was really everything to us. She is a dear little woman; so very unassuming and modest, and her singing quite makes one feel—all over, you know. Every one was talking about her, and as she is sure to become the fashion it was quite providential getting her before she becomes too common. And I've secured her to give you lessons, Mary; I want you to learn to sing in that—what you call *parlant* sort of style; it is so very telling. All the gentlemen

were quite *raving* about her. As to Prince Pickle-orwhiski, he could really hardly contain himself. It was very gratifying. By-the-by, my dear Olivia, I was so surprised to see that you and she were old friends. Did you know her abroad, my dear?"

"No, in London. We lived in the same house for some months."

"Dear me! how curious! But you didn't say so the other day when we talked about her?"

"Because I didn't know her present Italianised name. She was plain Mrs. Elliston then. She tells me she could not get on she found without Italianising it."

"Ah!" said Kate, yawning; "now I remember all about her. I thought I'd seen her before. Of course! She was the Mrs. Elliston we heard two or three years ago at a concert, and whom Julian was so very odd about; pretended not to admire her, when I know he *did* all the time. By-the-by, he was in one of his odd tempers this evening. What put him out, I wonder? He was in such high spirits when he came in, and so dreadfully cross before he went away!"

Mrs. Pomfret looked at Olivia and then at her daughter. I think she had a shrewd suspicion that he had not been received as he expected by the former; and she was sorry for it. Her opi-

nions upon this, as upon many other subjects, had undergone a change. Julian's constant inquiries after Miss Marston during the last eighteen months had proved to his aunt that the impression Olivia had made upon him was not worn away. She used to think he was not a marrying man: she knew of so many flirtations and scrapes he had been in, that it took a long time to persuade her that he was ever likely to bind himself irrevocably to one woman. But he was no longer very young now, and if he could be brought so to bind himself she believed it would be a very blessed thing for him. Lionel, alas! no longer stood between Olivia and her nephew, and Olivia was clearly the only woman for whom he was ever likely to sacrifice his independence. It was not, indeed, a brilliant marriage, such as the handsome and popular Julian Westbrook might no doubt make if he chose. In taking a penniless wife he would even have to curtail many of his luxuries and extravagancies. But Mrs. Pomfret, who, with all her follies, had curious instincts of good sense, and with whose warp of vulgarity was closely knit the woof of right feeling, had made up her mind that these drawbacks were as nothing when weighed in the scale with such a wife as Olivia would make. She had resolved, therefore, to encourage the idea as much as possible, and she could not help feeling,

from both Olivia's manner and Julian's, that the first meeting had not been propitious.

"It was so very nice of Julian coming over from Paris for my party."

(Oh, the sinner! he had told her this with an unblushing face.)

"He certainly is a most *distang-ey*-looking man. Lord Dumberly was saying so; and on looking round the room there certainly was no one *more* so. I'm so sorry he didn't bring his corney. He might have accompanied Madame Stellino in a song. However, we can have that another night. They'll often meet here, I hope. Something so sweet in the voice and the corney together."

Olivia sat wondering in silence what would come of all this. Presently Mrs. Pomfret heaved herself upon her legs, and took the bedroom candle which the butler presented to her at that moment.

"Well, my dears, I suppose we'd better all go to bed. I'm very tired. You look so, too, my dear Olivia; though I must say I never saw you in such beauty as you were to-night. Quite made a sensation, I assure you. The duchess asked particularly who you were. I told her you were a direct descendant of Robert the Bruce's henchman. By-the-by, Lady Caerlavrock never wished me good night, or said a word about the dinner, which I think she *might* have done. I suppose

Henry is gone to smoke at his club. Your papa has been in bed for the last hour. Oh dear, how tired I am!" And she toiled up-stairs, followed by the three young ladies.

Old Mr. Harrington called the next day when the ladies were at luncheon. As a privileged person, who was admitted everywhere and at all hours, he was let in.

"Sorry I couldn't come to you last night, my dear madam. I only returned from the North, where I've been for the last three weeks, by the last train; found your card, but was too much *done* to go and dress. I'd been up at six in the morning; pretty well at sixty-eight—eh? ho! ho! Well, I haven't seen any of you since Henry's marriage was announced. Congratulate you, I'm sure, heartily. Famous little girl, Lady Helena; known her since she was in long clothes; and good woman her mother—very good."

"It is a marriage which gives both families satisfaction," said Mrs. Pomfret, importantly, and ignoring the last remark.

"I'm sure it must. I'm sure it must. I haven't seen Henry since he was a boy, but I hear he's uncommonly good-looking, and a universal favourite with the ladies; and I know how generous Pomfret's been to him, so Lady Caerlavrock has every reason to be satisfied. Well, and how

has the world been treating *you*, young lady?" he asked, turning to Olivia. "I haven't seen you since we met at the Quintus Smiths'! How's your aunt, eh? Quite well? that's right. You know Algy Tharpe's abroad? That queer fish, his father, now the boy's *away*, regrets him a little, I think, and appreciates him rather more, though he wouldn't own it for the world—ho! ho!"

"I hear he is a most *objectionable* person," said Mrs. Pomfret: "irreligious, and democratic, and all that sort of thing. Indeed, from all that I can gather, the neighbourhood generally is one with which we shall not care to associate much. How did Sir Warwick Milton manage, now, do you know, Mr. Harrington? Did he visit every one? It is so very difficult to draw the *line*, eh?"

"Well, as to visiting, my dear madam, there was not much of that sort of thing went on at the Abbey of late years, for sundry reasons. But he knew every one about—oh dear, yes!—hem—and was on friendly terms, too, whenever he was there, which was but seldom."

"Ah! I forgot; owing to his low connexion, of course, he *would* know every one, naturally. Lady Milton drank herself to death, didn't she? Horrible, to be sure! And the father is some drunken apothecary in the village, isn't he?"

"He was, my dear madam. He died, at last, of delirium tremens some few weeks ago."

"What could have made Sir Warwick marry such a woman?" exclaimed Kate, with indignation. "A man in his position, too! So disgraceful!"

"The disgrace, my dear young lady, came afterwards. Lady Milton's conduct made it disgraceful, not her birth. He was just one-and-twenty when he married, and she was then the loveliest creature I've ever set eyes on. He was madly in love with her; so were all the young men about the county; only Sir Warwick was the biggest fish, and she played him skilfully, and landed him. She didn't care *that* for him," and the old gentleman snapped his fingers, "as he very soon learnt. She led him a pretty life, poor fellow!"

"Was her conduct ever——?" and Mrs. Pomfret filled up the hiatus with an expressive nod.

"No; her conduct was never—*that*," replied the old gentleman. "Had it been he might have got rid of her. She was a low, cunning, vulgar-minded woman, with the most violent temper I ever met with, and so desperately addicted to drink that she would get hold of the spirit of wine when everything else was kept from her."

"Dear, dear, how shocking! Well, how any woman *can* acquire such a taste!" said Mrs. Pomfret, finishing her third glass of sherry.

"How any man—particularly such a man as we have heard Sir Warwick is—could marry such a

woman is what passes *my* comprehension," cried Kate.

"Ah, but my dear Miss Kate, she was very different, to all appearance, at least, before her marriage. I saw her myself. Her manners then were so shy and retiring. She could blush and look as simple and innocent, while she was playing off all these boys one against the other. She had no more heart than this table-spoon, or she would have gone wrong; but she was a clever actress, and she managed to make poor Warwick believe that she loved him. She very soon threw off the mask. Why, he knew, of course, that she was ill educated, but he thought her naturally refined and tender-hearted, and had visions of educating her himself. He was a romantic youth, and looked forward to living in a sort of Arcadia, with this unsophisticated bride of his. She soon taught him better. He found he could do nothing with her. He tried every system: at first, kindness and indulgence. Then in disgust, he left her for a time; but the orgies she carried on with this drunken old father and some other choice spirits of the same sort created such a scandal, that Sir Warwick, hearing of it, came home, and mounted the strictest guard over her himself. Yet, in spite of it, she constantly eluded him. The scenes that used to take place between them were awful. I was witness

of one, myself; but I was almost the only person he ever admitted inside the doors. He felt the shame so very keenly. Poor fellow! how he stood it as he did, I can't think. At last, finding all of no avail, he put her in charge of a medical man and a nurse, with orders that she was never to be left by herself, day or night, and he himself went abroad; where, during the last few years, he almost constantly resided. He used to come over once a year, that he might look after his property, which he left in the hands of an agent, and also to judge for himself that his wife was properly taken care of. And that went on till her death, eighteen months ago."

"One can't help feeling for him very much, I'm sure," said Mrs. Pomfret. "I understand that he has taken such a disgust to the place, that he says he shall never live there again himself. But with his fine fortune, and not being an *old* man, of course he will marry again, eh? I hope we may make his acquaintance, for we hear he is such a delightful person, don't we, Kate?"

"Yes. Isn't he very handsome, Mr. Harrington?"

"Baronets of large fortune always are, my dear Miss Kate,—ho! ho! But joking apart, Warwick Milton *was* an uncommonly good-looking fellow some years ago. He's got what our French neigh-

bours call *un peu farouche*,—neglects his appearance, and so on—which is a pity, and shuns all society. No, there is very little chance of his marrying again. He had such a sickener of it, that it'll last him for life, I'm afraid."

"Oh, Mr. Harrington, we must *hope* not. It would be too sad; if it was only for the sake of the baronetcy, which becomes extinct, I believe? Why, it's a positive *duty* for him to marry."

"I doubt whether he'll think so, my dear madam. He has his own ideas of duty. He is a peculiar fellow, you know. He has a great dread of pretty young ladies, ho! ho! ho! And he believes that if one consented to marry him, it would be, like the late Lady Milton, for the sake of his title and fortune. If he ever *does* marry, therefore, it must be some girl who doesn't know the worldly advantages he has to offer, but takes him for himself."

Mrs. Pomfret's countenance fell.

"Really, I don't see how that is to be managed —eh? How is a girl to be in ignorance of his position? And it is quite a mistake to imagine that girls, *well* brought up, are so worldly and mercenary,—quite. I'm sure we know some who have made very poor marriages, and are really very happy. If Sir Warwick is so delightful a person *any* one might fall in love with him, eh?

And as to his finding a girl who knew nothing about him, why, it could only be in a railway carriage, or something of that sort, where she didn't hear his name. It's absurd."

"So it is, my dear madam." Mr. Harrington's face wore an amused look as he added, "That's why I don't think it likely he ever will marry."

Olivia had been an interested,—nay, excited listener to the above conversation, in which she had taken no part. Once or twice she had burned to ask a question, and had refrained. She now rose and walked to the window, her heart beating fast, her brain throbbing; doubtful still whether the strange and improbable idea which had been born within her, and had been growing up, stronger and stronger, during the last few minutes, had any foundation, except in a disordered fancy, which had fed one thought until it assimilated and absorbed unto itself all others.

She looked over the wire blind on to the gloomy pavement. She saw absolutely nothing; it all seemed to swim before her. She knew they were leaving the dining-room; she heard the door opened; she heard Mrs. Pomfret's voice on the staircase. She turned round: the old gentleman was making the girls laugh, and chuckling himself, over one of his own jokes, as he followed them out of the room. A sudden, irrepressible desire seized

her to say something—to ask him one question, now that she might do so without three pairs of eyes fixed on her.

"Mr. Harrington," she called out. Her voice was thick, and it trembled; but he heard her, and turned back. She leant upon the back of a chair.

"Mr. Harrington—do you know any one—near—near—Westbridge, of the name of *Thompson*?"

He gave an unconscious little start; raised his eyebrows, while the corners of his mouth twitched drolly; then he shut the door gently.

"My dear young lady, how did you come to know anything about that—person?"

"*My* question is already answered, Mr. Harrington. I see that my suspicion was right. Can you—oh! *can* you tell me anything of him? In my great trouble he was my only friend. He was so good to my dear father, and did everything for me when *he* was taken; and I know—I am sure—that he has thought me—that—that—in short, that I have appeared ungrateful to him. If you know where he is, will you tell him that you have seen me, and that I can never, never forget his kindness? He was misled—purposely misled, about me—I am sure he was. I wrote to him, but, I suppose, he never got my letter. He would have answered, I think, if he had."

"He is abroad now; but I shall see him before very long, I dare say. Depend on it I will give him your message."

Then they went up-stairs. Olivia was lighter at heart than she had felt for many a long day.

CHAPTER III.

JULIAN UNDER DISCUSSION.

SHE was lighter at heart; for now that she knew who he really was, and all about him, he did not seem so far off, so lost to her as he had done before she possessed any clue to his past or present history. Not that the mystery shrouding his life had ever disquieted her: she had such perfect faith in him that she never doubted but that he had some good reason for keeping the facts of his story from her. And now the knowledge of his worldly position had certainly no power to elate her; rather the contrary, for it seemed, in many ways, to set a barrier between them. But at least she knew how to reach him: she should hear of him,—might see him: he no longer was of that shadowy world to which belong those who cross our life-path for an

instant, and are swallowed up in the darkness, without leaving a trace behind them.

She needed no explanation of the circumstances which had led him to assume another name, and up to the very end to conceal his rank from her. It was easy to conceive why, when that name had become a byword, he shrank from observation, and how, with his tastes and habits, he preferred living as an obscure artist, whose antecedents were unknown, to receiving the inquiries and condolences of his friends, when he went amongst them. Nor was she at a loss to understand his conduct towards herself, in this matter. Mr. Harrington had supplied the right clue to it, when he said that if Sir Warwick ever married, it must be to a woman who was ignorant of his station and fortune. After his bitter experience, it was not surprising that such a character as his should desire, even when the feeling was no warmer than friendship, to test how far he was valued for himself. And when the feeling deepened into something stronger, more and more strenuous would be this desire; more and more anxious would he be to hide those adventitious gifts of fortune which had been his undoing twenty years before.

Then, with a sharp pang, the thought arose that she could never any more be to him as one so tested. She had rejected the happiness offered to

her, when she believed him to be an obscure artist. Was not the door shut against her for ever? How would he ever be brought to understand that she had refused to be his wife because she thought that compassion, solely, moved him to ask her? That his lands, and his wealth, and his title were as nothing to her,—nay, that, like the Lady of Burleigh, she could find it in her heart to sigh,

> Oh that he
> Were once more that landscape painter,
> Which did win my heart from me!

Taught, as he had been, by the severest lesson which it can be given to a man to learn, that where he stakes most, he may be most deceived, was it to be looked for that he should again run a similar risk and, after her rejection of him on his own personal merits, that he should come forward with the make-weight of his social position?

It was hardly to be looked for. With the tinge of bitter sarcasm which coloured his thoughts at times, the probability of his success under the altered circumstances might cross his mind; and the blood of indignant shame rushed into her face as this possibility occurred to her. It was but for a moment. "No," she said to herself, "he knows me too well for that. If he ever asks me again to be his wife, it will be because he believes—because he *knows* that I love him. I do not suppose that

he will ever do so—that he will ever wish to renew our old intimacy under his own name—perhaps it would not be the same thing, he may think. But if he can ever resolve to break all his own vows and self-made laws, so far as to seek me now—why, I know that it will be because he is sure that all the riches and honours in the world would not weigh with me, but that I take him for himself—and for himself alone."

The next day Clara gave her first lesson to Mary. Mother and daughter were equally charmed with Madame Stellino. Kate was less enthusiastic; but then she had got into an ugly habit lately of disparaging any woman who was much admired. Olivia was an exception; but then Olivia disarmed hostility of this kind by remaining so much in the background. Had she come the least more forward, Kate's friendship would not have held her tongue from saying some sharp things, as indeed we shall see by-and-by.

"Her manner is too *doucereux*—don't you think so?" she whispered to Olivia, while the lesson was going on. "She is like Uriah Heap, so very 'umble, that really I can't quite believe she is sincere; and as to her beauty, why, if you come to examine her critically, her eyes are very ugly—positively ugly."

"They are very expressive," answered Olivia,

glad to avoid giving an opinion on Kate's first proposition.

"You will stay to luncheon, Madame Stellino?" said Mrs. Pomfret, at the end of the lesson. "We shall be going down presently. Miss Marston and you, I find, are old acquaintances."

"Ah! more than acquaintances, are we not, dear?" said the little singing-mistress, taking Olivia's hand in both of hers. "She is the best friend I have ever had, though every one is very kind to me, I'm sure. I have no right to expect all the kindness I have met with."

Luncheon was announced, and with it—Mr. Julian Westbrook.

"So glad to see you, my dear Julian!" exclaimed his aunt; "for I hardly had a moment's conversation with you the other night. Full of engagements, I suppose, as usual? Come, let us go down-stairs. Ah, by-the-by, you don't know Madame Stellino, do you? My nephew, Mr. Westbrook. You must become better acquainted, being both so musical. Your corney, Julian, would go so sweetly with her voice."

Madame Stellino returned Westbrook's bow with perfect self-possession, but without looking at him. She managed to get hold again of Olivia's hand, and went down-stairs holding it, and

hing, a low, rippling laugh (yet subdued and

chastened, as became her present character), while she talked in an undertone upon some trivial subject. Olivia was petrified at her coolness. It seemed scarcely credible that this man, whom she now met with such apparent indifference, was the cause of all Clara's sin and shame; that he had once been the object of her passionate love, and for long, long afterwards the object of her reproaches and tears.

He probably understood her, and guessed how much of that indifference was real, as he also divined her motive for parading her intimacy with Olivia, which she evidently did. To find her here was, of course, the very last thing in the world he wished; but *he* also, when he took the trouble, was a decent actor; so here were two people, the relations between whom were assuredly nearer akin to tragedy than to comedy, playing light and airy parts, less to deceive their audience, perhaps, than to deceive each other.

Thus, for instance:

Clara (*in an audible murmur to Olivia*). Do you remember our old Italian lessons, dear? Ah! how I used to enjoy them. I always say I owe my pronunciation to you.

Mary. And it is very pure, for I heard Signor Degl' Occhi say so.

Julian (*to Mrs. Pomfret*). What a lucky fellow

Henry is! Lady Helena is really charming. You must all be delighted with her.

Mrs. P. It is a marriage which gives great satisfaction to *both* families.

Mary (*laughing*). She is so much in love, you know, Julian, that she thinks Henry absolute perfection.

Kate. Oh, so they all do.

Julian (*glancing at Olivia*). There's the advantage of arriving fresh from Jamaica—no good-natured person to spread good-natured stories about one.

Kate. Oh, that's the penalty *you* pay, Julian, for being a man of fashion.

Clara. They have sent me a box from the Covent Garden Opera for Tuesday, but of course I cannot go alone. Would you come with me, dear?

Olivia. I have promised Mrs. Pomfret to go with her—for the first time. We shall see you there, perhaps.

Clara. Ah, from the grand tier you are not likely to see poor little me—somewhere on the third or fourth, I suppose. But indeed, though I want to go, I shan't have the courage to go alone.

Mrs. P. (*to Julian*). I'm sure I never heard of *anything* being said against Henry, either at Jamaica or elsewhere. I can't think what you mean.

Julian. Nothing ever *is* said against eldest sons. They are like kings, ain't they, Miss Marston? No one has the bad taste to repeat scandal about the heir to a large fortune. It is only us small fry who can be fastened on with impunity by the hornets of society.

Olivia made as though she heard not this appeal. She went on talking in an undertone to Clara. Mr. Pomfret and his son, who had been closeted in the library, discussing matters of business for the last hour, now appeared. They seldom came in to luncheon—were seldom at home, indeed, at this hour. But now, hearing that Julian was here, they walked in, and found vacant chairs on either side of Madame Stellino.

Julian. Just talking of you, Harry—saying what a lucky dog you are.

Henry. Thank you. When am I to return the compliment? You oughtn't to let me get the start of you in this way; only you're so hard to please. Madame Stellino, let me give you some of this *pâté de foie gras.*

Julian. Ah! if I were in your shoes, my boy——"

Henry. By-the-by, I hear there is a fair lady in Paris heart-broken at your departure!

Julian. Stuff!

Mr. Pomfret (*with conviction*). Julian, follow

Harry's example as quick as you can. That's *my* advice—you know I seldom give it.

Julian. I will do you that justice, uncle. Unfortunately, like some other rare things, though valuable, it isn't of much service to me. I assure you I heartily wish I were married—that is, to the right person, of course. I have seen so much of life, and of woman's deception, that I *am* difficult to please; and my star has not yet come into conjunction with the right person's, I'm afraid, as astrologers would say.

Kate (*with a very knowing smile*). How about Grosvenor-square—eh, Julian? Your star ought to be ashamed of itself, if it doesn't very *often* hover over there!

Julian. Isn't it delightful, Miss Marston, to hear all my relations pitching into me for not marrying—a poor devil, who is heir to nothing a year? as though prudent, sensible young ladies ever married men who had not, at least, expectations.

Mrs. P. Nonsense, Julian. You know very well there are plenty of people who would marry you, if you *chose*. You've quite enough. Only hitherto, as Henry says, you've been so difficult to please. Madame Stellino, you're eating nothing.

Clara. Oh yes, I am, Mrs. Pomfret; only I was listening to Mr. Westbrook's apologies for not

being married (*laughing*). I know so little of the world, you know: I am being instructed. I suppose a gentleman who has no expectations may encourage them with impunity among the numerous poor women who fall in love with him? Is it so?

The words, accompanied by a light laugh, and by a mischievous glance across the table—just as a clever child points some harmless shaft of satire—fell like a bomb between Westbrook and Olivia. To the latter, Clara's extraordinary powers of dissimulation, under the circumstances, seemed little short of miraculous. That she should be able to speak to him thus—that she should put her finger upon the identical spot which had been the curse of her young life, and do this with a smile upon her lip, before the man's very face—it seemed incredible. Even Westbrook looked disconcerted for a moment: he lowered his eyes. It was viewed by his uncle's family at large as an amusing instance of the power of guileless innocence over the world, the flesh, and the devil. Father and son were especially pleased: I think they did not very much dislike seeing Julian discomfited. "A very good little woman, as simple as a school-girl apparently, that Madame—what's her name?—of your's, my dear," said Mr. Pomfret afterwards, to his better half. "Did you see how she roasted

old Julian?" laughed Henry, to his sisters. "And she is a deuced pretty little woman. I don't think Julian altogether relished it."

After that speech of Clara's nothing worth record passed. There were shreds of talk, but Westbrook and Clara cut across each other no more, except just at parting, when Mrs. Pomfret said:

"Positively, we must fix a night when you can come and dine with us, Madame Stellino; and you too, Julian—and bring your corney—and we can have some quiet music in the evening. Let me see, what night are we free, girls?"

"Wednesday is our only free night next week."

"Thank you. I shall be charmed to dine with you on Wednesday," said Clara, in a low voice, but not so low as to prevent Julian's hearing what she said, which it was meant he should: "to dine, and to sing afterwards, as much as you please. As to the *cornet*, I don't know what to say. I'm afraid I am not accustomed to sing with a wind instrument (and amateurs' instruments are often particularly windy). I think its superior volume of sound, you know, would quite drown my poor little voice. Besides," she added, laughing, "from all I hear of Mr. Westbrook, it might be dangerous to my peace of mind. If I do not wish to swell

the number of his victims I had better see as little of him as possible."

"Monstrous sharp little woman!" muttered Henry.

Julian pretended not to have heard. He turned his back, and talked energetically to Kate about the colour of her gown. The girls were going to walk to Lady Caerlavrock's with their brother. They declared that Julian should accompany them. As the carriage was at the door, and Mrs. Pomfret said she was going to drive with Olivia, Julian saw there was no chance of effecting what he so earnestly desired—an interview with the latter. She had left the room with Madame Stellino, and he saw her no more; for she went up to put on her bonnet, and did not come down till she had seen the cousins leave the house.

This hurried, whispered word had passed between her and Clara, in the hall, under the very nose of a powdered footman:

"Wasn't I brave, Olivia? Don't you give me credit for that last stroke?"

"You have wonderful powers of acting, certainly; but what is the use of it? For whose benefit do you go out of your way to do all this? He is quite indifferent about you, as you see."

"You don't know him as well as I do. If I don't show him that I'm not to be *crushed*"—here

her eyes flashed—"that I'm no longer afraid of him—that I no longer care for his worthless love, he will try and crush *me*. He would do anything to get me out of this house now; but it is too late. Oh, I know him better than you do, Olivia, though he *does* want you to be his wife."

Her look drove through Olivia like a sword, as she said this with suppressed bitterness; but the look, encountering nothing that it could slay in its passage, fell harmless. The words did not trouble Olivia, except as revealing a jealousy which she could not but acknowledge was natural under the circumstances.

"As you know him so well," she said, calmly, "you know what value to attach to such attentions, transferred from one woman to another as easily as he changes his coat."

"He is in earnest, however, now. I know him, and I tell you I am sure of it." Then, in a voice that shook, she added, suddenly—"Tell me, Olivia, if he asks you, shall you marry him"

Then Olivia flushed up to her temples.

"You don't know *me*, Clara—that is very evident. I would sooner beg my bread in the streets. I feel such a contempt for him now, that I look back with wonder to the time when—perhaps I thought differently. He is a worthless man. Try and not trouble your head about him further.

And when you meet him in this house, as you must, I suppose, take my advice, Clara, and keep as clear of him as possible. You got out of the singing business very cleverly. That is your only dignified course, to avoid him in every way. Let neither vanity, nor anything else, induce you ever to renew an intimacy which once caused you so much misery. Good-bye. I can't stay any longer; Mrs. Pomfret will be waiting."

She ran up-stairs. The footman, who was almost tired of this whispered conference, opened the hall door, and Clara, with her roll of music under her arm, slipped out. She was due at a house hard by at three, and it was now past three: but she did not go there yet awhile. In a state of fierce excitement, she let her feet carry her whithersoever they would, up one street and down another, while her thoughts fed upon the only subject in the world that lay near her heart. It was in vain to talk as she had done: to try and deceive herself no less than Olivia, by using such words as "scorn" and "hatred." They had met now, after a long interval of time, and she knew that, in spite of his conduct, she loved him as passionately as ever. Could she, by any means in her power, bring him back to her feet? She would have washed *his* with her tears; but that would be very unavailing with such a man, she knew.

Sharper weapons, fitter for this world's warfare, she must use, if she hoped for success; and vanity, no less than passion, urged her to arm herself for the enterprise.

After thrusting some necessary cards in at twenty or thirty doors, the two ladies drove round and round the Park. It was still early in the afternoon; there was nothing passing to divert Mrs. Pomfret's attention from the matter in her thoughts, so, after a while, she up and spake:

"Our conversation at luncheon puts me in mind to say something to you, my dear. I dare say you remember, formerly, my saying a good deal to you about Julian, warning you that he wasn't a marrying man, and a desperate flirt, and so on? I dare say you haven't forgotten it?"

"No, I remember it quite well."

"He's a very changed man, my dear, since then. Having prejudiced you, perhaps, originally, I think it but right to tell you what is the truth now. He has the makings in him of a very good husband,—believe me he has."

She waited for a reply, but none came. Olivia was in a very uncomfortable position. She felt that the conversation was nearing with frightful rapidity the subject which, of all others, she most dreaded discussing with Mrs. Pomfret. It was a rocky headland, looming through the mist to the

occupant of a rudderless craft. What could she say? What could she do? Her hands were tied in this detestable business: she could explain nothing, and yet she felt that some explanation, some sort of justification, would, if Mrs. Pomfret pushed her very hard, be difficult to avoid.

"I observed both the other night and to-day, my love, such a change in your *manner* towards him from what it used to be, which is the reason of my speaking. I know that you haven't met for two years, and that you particularly wished him *not* to know where you were living all this time, owing I fancy to your brother's not being very cordial with him,—eh? However, you can't sacrifice your prospects to your brother's fancies entirely, and now that you have come out again into the world, if you like Julian as much as I am sure you *used* to, why I can only say, I think you might do worse. I've never seen him so faithful to the idea of any girl before as he is to you. I don't say that he mayn't have amused himself in the mean time. I dare say you'll find some one in the world to tell you that he has. But young men *will* be young men, you know. One must look at these things in a sensible point of view without any high-flown—what you may call *romance*. There was a time, I confess it, when I didn't think Julian would ever have steadied down to be a

marrying man. Now, his uncle and I really begin to have hopes. We think that if he fell into good hands, he really has the makings of quite as steady a husband as—as most men."

This, perhaps, would hardly have been a very encouraging view of the case to Olivia had she seriously so regarded it, but Mrs. Pomfret was anxious not to seem to exaggerate her nephew's claims as heir presumptive to every conjugal virtue. Olivia still said nothing, so the good lady went on.

"He has twelve hundred a year. That's not riches, certainly; still it's enough to live on with economy; and you're not extravagant. Perhaps he might get something, too. He has so many friends among great people, you know. It's astonishing how much they think of Julian. And he's very clever—there's no doubt of it; only, unfortunately, he has been so idle up to the present; but if you marry him he'll get on; oh! I've no doubt about it."

"I shall never marry Mr. Westbrook, Mrs. Pomfret."

"Why not, my dear? I think two years ago you would have married him. You can't have seen any one in the interval, I suppose, whom you prefer? As to that young Tharpe, you told me yourself it was all your aunt's nonsense. I can't help fancying things went to some length between

you and Julian two years ago. At all events, *he* has remained quite unchanged. I'm sure I never saw him, never had a letter from him, that he didn't ask about you. You know, Olivia, that as long as my dear lost angel was alive I wanted you for *him*, and I was dead against Julian. Perhaps I was unjust towards him. Yes," she added, with her handkerchief to her eyes, "if my Lionel was living I shouldn't be pleading Julian's cause, my dear, you may depend upon that. For I look on you as a very superior creature, Olivia, cut out by nature for keeping a man straight and steady, and getting what you may call an *influence* over him."

"I am afraid you greatly over-rate my abilities, Mrs. Pomfret. I have need—I feel it every hour of the day—of some one to guide *me*, on the contrary. I am full of faults that your kindness blinds you to, perhaps. I am proud, and often very intolerant, and irritable. I should never do as the wife of a man whom I could not respect as well as love. I have no vocation for guiding a husband, and keeping him straight by influence, and so on."

"Well, my dear, one must be lenient—a *little* lenient to the follies of youth. When a man is faithful to one person at the end of two years, it shows, I think, that he has sown his wild oats."

"People's ideas of faithfulness differ. Mr.

Westbrook has long passed the age when it is necessary to be lenient to any follies or sins he may commit on the score of youth. He is of an age to stand or fall, in a woman's estimation, upon what he *is*—not upon what he may become. However, all this, dear Mrs. Pomfret, is beside the point. The real question is, whether under any possible circumstances I could ever love your nephew enough to marry him. I had better tell you frankly, at once, that whatever I may once have thought, I now know that I could never love him. I say nothing about respect; I leave that quite out of the question, for I have said enough to show you that a marriage between us is impossible."

"Well, my dear, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry. I can't help hoping you'll change your mind, because, really, looking at it altogether, though not a brilliant marriage for you in point of money, I think, in your present position, it's as good a thing as you could do. I think you'd find it answered better than you expect. There *must* always be some drawback, and Julian really has his good points, and you'd do a great deal with him—a great deal, I'm sure. I wish you would see it in that light. I can't think what can have changed you so about him, for there *was* a time when you were always inclined to make excuses for him, and

see——"

"Dear Mrs. Pomfret! please say no more: it pains me so much to talk on this subject. It very little signifies why my opinion of Mr. Westbrook is changed. I can explain nothing. I can only tell you that any regard I ever had for him is quite gone. As your nephew, I shall be civil whenever I meet him in your house; but I had rather meet him as seldom as possible. Do not ask more of me, for, if you encourage this idea of his about me, I—I shall have to leave you, dear Mrs. Pomfret. I debated whether I ought to come at all, knowing that I should probably meet him; and now, if you urge this upon me, I cannot stay —I cannot, indeed. Of course, I have no right to expect that you should shut the door upon your nephew; no wish, indeed, that you should do so, only be kind enough not to throw me purposely in his way, to let me see as little of him as I can; in short, not to take part against me in this."

Mrs. Pomfret wondered much; but she had no choice save to give a reluctant consent to Olivia's request. Time—she had great faith in time. This little difference, whatever it might be, which had arisen between Julian and Olivia would come all right after a few weeks, no doubt. She did not at all abandon hope, though she had sufficient knowledge of Olivia to perceive that the affair henceforward must be left to take its own course, without a helping hand from her. She puzzled herself think-

ing what could have happened to make Olivia so severe and bitter about Julian; and she half promised herself, when a convenient season offered, to question him on the subject.

That night, about half-past ten o'clock, as Olivia sat alone in the drawing-room—the others had just set off for a couple of parties,—a cab drove up to the door, and a ring at the bell resounded through the house. Olivia laid down her book and listened. Who could it be at this hour? She heard the hall door opened. There was a sound of voices down below, and then of some one coming up-stairs. She went pale, and her heart beat quick: she stood up as the door of the drawing-room was thrown aside, and the figure of a man, bronzed and bearded, in a well worn and very dusty shooting-jacket, with a travelling-pouch slung across his shoulder, appeared on the heels of the servant, who announced with imperturbable calm, "Mr. Marston."

With a little cry of pleasure she sprang forward, and was folded in her brother's arms.

CHAPTER IV.

A WET SUNDAY.

THE meeting of brother and sister after their long parting, and their common trouble, is of those things that cannot be described. There was little said, on either side, at first; for the woman's tears flowed silently, as she lay there in her brother's arms, and he too well understood the mingled feelings which sought this natural relief, not to let it have its course. By degrees, however, broken sentences—question and answer, as to his voyage and his landing, as to all that had befallen each, since the last letters were exchanged, followed in rapid succession; and then, as they drew two low arm-chairs together near the fire (for though May, it was quite an evening to enjoy

one), the links of more connected conversation formed themselves.

It was Saturday night, and twelve o'clock found them still sitting there. The Pomfrets would soon be home, and Rupert had no wish in his present condition to encounter Olivia's hostess and her daughters. He had only landed that evening at Southampton, and felt tired and dirty.

"I dropped my things at Farrance's as I came along. Being near you, I thought it the best place I could go to for two or three nights till I could look round me. Of course it would be too expensive for a continuance. You will remain here with the Pomfrets a little longer, I suppose, before you come and we set up our household gods together?"

"They are very kind in wishing me to stay with them as long as I can, and even to accompany them to Milton-Eyre, when they leave town the middle of next month, but I shall be glad, for many reasons, when I am in my own home again, however humble it is."

"I must have a few weeks before deciding on anything definitely. When I have seen Claxton, and had a talk with him, I shall see how our affairs stand."

"You must not hurry on my account. As I said before, I have a home here for as long as I like. Mary is grown such a darling, Rupert."

"Is she?" said he, smiling. "Made a great deal of, I suppose, then, in all this fine society? You can't think how odd it seems getting among civilised people again. The very look of these rooms—they're nothing particular, I dare say—but the comfort of those easy-chairs in their clean chintz covers, the flowers and books about—it is all so unlike what I've been surrounded by. And so Mary is grown up a pretty girl, is she? I always thought she would."

"I said she was 'a darling.' I don't think I ought to raise your expectations about her looks. Some people admire her, but she is not at all the sort of girl to make a great effect in society. It is in the fire-light of home she shines."

"Ah!" said her brother, with a disappointed intonation, "well, I'm sorry, for I'm afraid a long abstinence from the sight of a really pretty English face has made me a greater fool on the subject than I was;" and he laughed as he kissed his sister. "Few brothers care much about their sisters' looks, I believe, but it makes me happy to see you, Olivia, twice as handsome as you were two years ago, in spite of all you've gone through, my poor child! There is the quarter striking. Good night. God bless you!"

Mary returned from her two parties with a headache. She brightened up wonderfully on hearing of the visitor whom Olivia had had, and

while the other ladies were kind and voluble in their questions, she drank in silently, with eager eyes and a heightened colour, every detail which Olivia gave of her brother's voyage and arrival.

But, in spite of this, Nature would have her way, and the following morning she was so unwell that her mother forbade her getting up. The family apothecary was sent for, and pronounced that she must be kept quiet for a day or two; there was no cause for uneasiness, but a tendency to fever made it desirable that the impatient patient should not be exposed to cold or excitement. They went to church, leaving her, poor child, a little cross at the close imprisonment; and on their return a modified edition of the bronzed and bearded Rupert presented himself; still shaggy, and in clothes which had rather a savage cut about them, but scrupulously clean at least, and in boots, the polish of which reflected credit on Farrance's shoeblack.

Little Mary, hearing the bell, stole out of bed, and with nothing but her dressing-gown on, peeped at him from over the banisters. She could only see, from her bird's-eye view, that he had a long black beard, and that there was a little bald place at the top of his head,—the result of West Indian climate, no doubt, for his years could not justify it. She returned to bed, however, nourishing a belief that

capillary adornments were quite superfluous to manly beauty; indeed, perhaps rather effeminate, unless in the shape of a beard; there could be no effeminacy about *that*.

It was a wet afternoon; and all London ladies know how doubly pleasant an agreeable visitor is on a wet Sunday. They have diligently read their *Court Journal;* they have skimmed the lightest of the articles in the *Saturday Review;* they have compunctions of conscience in taking up the novel which they left last night, and are dying to finish; conventionality forbids them even the poor solace of pulling about a little bit of crochet (because it is styled "*work*,"—Heaven save the mark; and is therefore a more heinous sin than absolute idleness, with slander and Sunday dinner-parties). How blest is a pleasant visitor then at such a time! And Rupert, though never what is called a brilliant talker, could be very agreeable in company that he liked. He had now a great deal that was new to tell and to describe; and the delightful novelty of finding himself once more among ladies of average intelligence who were interested in all he said, gave zest to his narrative. In the middle of it all, Henry came in, and the meeting between the two men was very cordial.

"Delighted to see you, Marston! I began to be afraid you wouldn't arrive in time to assist at

the august ceremony which is to make me a happy man on Wednesday fortnight. I want you to be my best man, old fellow."

Mrs. Pomfret coughed.

"My dear Henry, did you forget your cousin, Julian, who——"

"Oh, no, I didn't forget him, only I'd rather have Marston as my best man—that's all."

"I'm very much flattered, Pomfret. I never was one in my life, and I don't know what the duties of the post are; but if you think such an uncouth-looking savage as I am won't disgrace your wedding, I shall be very glad to be your friend. I'm afraid the duties are not arduous enough to try my friendship," he added, smiling and looking round,—"I have a great debt of gratitude to pay every member of this family for their kindness to my sister, which I shall never be able to discharge."

"Beautifully turned phrase, by Jove! You must have been spouting among the Mormons. You paid them a visit, didn't you? I hope you didn't imbibe polygamy—eh?"

"Oh! Henry, we have been having the most amusing account of Mr. Marston's hurried journey to the great Salt Lake and back, and of all those curious, horrid people there," said Kate. "It's too shocking! And then such a funny account of the people he met at San Francisco. Do you

know, Mr. Marston, you ought to write a book, or give a lecture at the Royal Institution, and appear in London society as a star. It would be such fun, wouldn't it, Olivia?"

"Now, Miss Pomfret, you're satirical, and that's not kind on a fellow who has been exiled from his native land for two years, and living for the last nine months among sharpers, and cut-throats, and worshippers of Brigham Young. I haven't a claim or desire to be admitted into the sidereal system; and if I got there under false pretences, you would be the first to greet me with the words of Watts, or who is the great poet? who has written,

Twinkle, twinkle, *little* star,
How I wonder what you are!"

All the Pomfrets laughed and declared that it was evident that he only declined appearing in the world as "the great traveller," because he preferred the rôle of a wit.

"But then, for that, my dear fellow," said Henry, "you must shave. No wit was ever known with a beard like a rabbi. It doesn't suit a *diseur de bons mots*. Indeed, I'm not sure that it'll suit Threadneedle-street, or wherever it is old Claxton hangs out; though I grant it is a shame to part with such a beard, and fling one of Nature's choicest gifts back into her face as it were."

"I am afraid it must go," sighed Rupert, with

a comical shake of the head, as he stroked the silky hair which was doomed for sacrifice. "I'm afraid it must go."

"Beards have a good deal gone *out*," remarked Mrs. Pomfret, as though she were talking of crinoline or tight sleeves, instead of what Henry, with his euphemistic language, styled "one of Nature's choicest gifts." It would have sounded odd to say that eyes or noses had gone out; but that never struck Mrs. Pomfret.

"After the Crimea they became so very common, and now even the shopkeepers wear them," said Kate.

This was just one of those little speeches which Mary would never have made. It was not meant as uncivil; for, indeed, Kate still felt (only in a well regulated, and very different degree from two years ago) a liking, even an admiration, for Rupert. Perhaps it may have been intended as a friendly hint, from the lofty regions of fashion in which she now soared, to the wanderer on his return; but, for all that, it showed an obtuseness, which formed the strongest contrast to her sister's acute sensitiveness and delicacy of touch. Rupert was by no means a vain man, but if he had a personal weakness it was his beard. To be told by a young lady that he shared that weakness with shopkeepers was not quite pleasant.

"All sorts of things which were *in* when I left England have gone *out*, of course," he said, laughing: "and if I had any proper sense of shame I oughtn't to have appeared here in these clothes. I suppose I must get rigged out to-morrow, Pomfret; shorn and shod, and all the rest of it, after I've been in the City. I am going now to drive down to Dulwich, as I am sure to find Claxton at home on a wet Sunday evening, and I ought of course to see him as soon as possible."

"Can't you come back and dine here?" said Mrs. Pomfret. "Remember there will be always a knife and fork here whenever you choose to come."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pomfret; I should not be back in time, to-day. To-morrow, after all my business is over, and I am properly shaved," he added, glancing at Kate, with a half smile, "I shall be delighted."

"I am sorry to say you'll only find Olivia. Unfortunately we dine out. Not *Mary;* but then Mary will have to keep her room, I'm afraid, for some days, so you and your sister 'll have a tate-a-tate. But on Tuesday you must go with us to the Opera; dine and go with us, when you'll have an opportunity of making Lady Helena's acquaintance. She and Lady Caerlavrock are such *admirers* of Olivia, Mr. Marston, that you must, as you may

say, reciprocate the feeling. And I hope now that you've come you'll make Olivia begin to go out a little; for, indeed, there are plenty of places where Helena would have got her invitations if she would only have consented to go; but I've had such work to get her even to dine down-stairs with us, when we had company, and it's only to please Mary, I believe, she has agreed to go to the Opera."

Before Rupert could reply, the door opened, and Westbrook was announced. Who knew better than he the advantage of a wet Sunday? But he had not calculated on finding the visitor who was already installed in the drawing-room in Eaton-place. On the contrary, he had looked to find the ground unoccupied, and to have at least an hour of plain uninterrupted sailing, when he might put forth his most seductive arts of conversation for Olivia's benefit, with no other chorus than that of his admiring aunt and cousins. To find Rupert, of all men in the world, whom he believed to be safe in California, was particularly annoying; it seemed as if fortune were setting dead against him on all sides. First, there was Clara turning up, just when it was most detrimental to his prospects; and though he never could believe that she had betrayed herself for the sake of spiting him, yet this extraordinary friendship with Olivia, coupled with the marked coldness of the latter, gave him

just cause for uneasiness. And now, here was this confounded brother appearing, at the moment of all others when he was least wanted. Julian wished him at the bottom of the sea. But, being a man of the world, he greeted him with passable cordiality; more, indeed, than Rupert took the trouble to assume in return. The latter was conscious that Julian eyed him all over, much after the manner of a man knowing in horse-flesh who examines a horse. The look was carried deliberately from the shaggy hair down to the thick balmorals, traversing a surface of loose ill-fitting garments. It was not a supercilious glance, nor an impertinent stare; it was simply a composed and careful examination of something so unusual as to be worth that trouble. And as Rupert thought of his own appearance, and compared it with Julian's irreproachable "get-up"—the plastic perfection of that coat from Poole's, the statuesque rigidity of those trousers, the waxen sleekness of that moustache, the careful carelessness of that necktie, he felt all his bile, as of old, rising against the man, which was wholly irrational.

After a few common-place sentences, and a sufficient time had passed, to prevent the move appearing too marked and sudden, Olivia said,

"Will you come into the dining-room with me, Rupert? We have a good deal yet to talk over,

and Mrs. Pomfret will excuse us, as you are going on to Mr. Claxton's presently, and I shall not see you till late to-morrow."

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Pomfret. "Remember, dinner a quarter to seven on Tuesday, because we like being there at the beginning."

As the door closed upon the brother and sister, Julian flung himself back on the sofa beside his aunt, exclaiming, with a languid indifference,

"What a cad that fellow has grown! He usedn't to be so, Kate, when you were sweet on him formerly, though I never liked him—never could understand his being *her* brother."

"I don't know what you mean by my being sweet," said Kate, with flaming cheeks. "He was almost the only gentlemanlike man we ever saw at Caverton, and—and he could be very pleasant. It is very hard if a girl can't know a man without being talked of in that ridiculous, stupid way. Of course, since then I've seen more of the world, and though I still think him a pleasant person, it's a different thing, as I have more experience of society."

Henry, who had taken up the *Observer*, and pretended to be reading, felt Kate's defence to be rather illogical. Besides, though he disliked argument with Julian, there was something cowardly in not sticking up for his friend; so he laid down the paper, and said:

"If wearing a seedy coat and a shocking bad hat makes a man a cad, Marston is one, no doubt. So would you be, Julian, if you'd been two years without a supply from Poole's, and Lincoln and Bennett. But he has the true heart and mind of a gentleman, and he is a right good fellow into the bargain, let him wear what clothes he will."

"Oh! I've no doubt of it," said Julian, examining his nails carefully, as he spoke; "only heart and mind have so little to do in society, you know. The outside crust—manner, and tact, not *only* a decent coat—are what one goes by."

"I hope he will shave his beard before Tuesday evening," said Mrs. Pomfret, shaking her head; "because I should wish him, poor young man, in his altered circumstances, to make a favourable impression; and beards *have* certainly gone out."

Down-stairs, in the gloomy dining-room, Rupert was saying, as he eyed his sister keenly,

"I hope you don't see much of that fellow? It would be enough to make me take you away from this house, at all hazards, if I thought——"

She put her hand on his arm.

"You need have no fear. I know now, Rupert, how right you were long ago. My eyes are no longer blinded about him. If he was the only man left on earth I wouldn't marry him, dear. I dislike him far more—*far* more than you do."

He looked at her for a moment in surprise. He was in no humour to question her further on the subject; he believed her, and that was enough.

"Henry Pomfret is a very different fellow," he said. "Do you know, Olivia, when I met him in Jamaica, I thought he was just the sort of man I should like you to marry? If you and he had made acquaintance when he first returned, as I hoped——however, I dare say it wouldn't have answered."

"Certainly not; we are quite unsuited, as you will understand when you see Lady Helena."

"I hope Mary Pomfret is not *improved* like Kate, eh?" he asked, after a moment or two. "If so, I'm afraid I can't admire her, Olivia. Kate has lost all her youth—grown so hard and square, and stodgy. She used to be a nice simple girl enough, and now she seems one of your regular fashionable young ladies."

"You will not find Mary the least like Kate," was all Olivia's reply.

Then she stooped down to poke the fire, and while so engaged, she said rapidly:

"I want to ask you a question, Rupert. Have you heard lately from Mr. Thompson? I know he wrote twice to you. Have you heard since?"

"No; I answered his two letters. Why do you ask?"

"Because—oh! it is too long a story to tell you now; only Aunt Clo drove him from the house, and now that you are here, you must do your best, Rupert, to try and find him. You don't know how much I owe to him—all that he did for dear papa before he died; all he did for me, afterwards."

"I certainly hope to find him, and thank him, Olivia. He must be a fine fellow. His letters were sensible and kind, without any humbug of false modesty. And so Aunt Clo was rude to him, was she? Because he was an artist, I suppose. Very likely."

"Because she *thought* he was an artist. I have learnt quite recently, and by accident, this man's real story, Rupert. Shall I tell it you?"

And she did tell him, everything except what actually touched herself, and which it could do no good to talk of now. Indeed, knowing the jealous sensitiveness of her brother for what regarded her in such matters, the cautious, half-mistrustful tone of his letters about this very man, she felt it would be worse than useless to rouse Rupert's possible animosity against him, even if her own feelings had not been strongly averse to speaking of a love proffered and rejected.

After he was gone, she spun her girl's dream about him and Mary more industriously than

ever. All women are given naturally to a little match-making. And in this case everything—except Rupert's present income and position (for his prospects seemed famous)—smiled on the scheme. He had returned ripe for falling in love, and with the recollection of the bright little school-girl whom he had left, as vivid as ever. As to Mary, there could be no doubt that, in the interval, no other image had been found to efface the impression of the first man who had flattered her by his notice. How eagerly she questioned Olivia that evening, when the latter sat by the girl's bedside, as to all he had said, as to the stories of his foreign life which he had been telling them below, as to every little particular about him. Of course Mary's anxiety on these points was understood to arise from her interest in Olivia's brother, as such, and an old friend to boot. The thin veil was never torn aside between the two. Yet it is certain that Mary would never have plied her own sister with so many questions about Rupert Marston.

CHAPTER V.

BEFORE THE CURTAIN.

ALL hope of Mary's being able to dine downstairs with Olivia and Rupert the next day, was at an end when the doctor saw her that morning. She had a good deal of fever and was altogether in a state requiring attention and perfect quiet; he could not say whether it might "turn to anything" or not, but she was on no account to leave her bed.

It was an aggravation of the poor child's suffering to know that Olivia was enjoying Rupert's society alone, below (where she would far sooner have been than at the fine parties to which her mother and Kate were gone). The brother and sister had business to talk over, so that though

both regretted little Mary's absence, the discussion of their affairs was facilitated thereby.

Rupert was in high spirits. His salary was now doubled, and his advancement to a position of the highest trust in the house, left him no further anxiety about his future. He was for taking a small house, just large enough for Olivia and himself, somewhere in this part of London. He talked of going to an agent's about it the next day; and it was Olivia who suggested the prudence of not being in too great a hurry. She little thought how soon his ardour in the matter would cool.

Mrs. Pomfret had taken a double box on the pit tier, which enabled her to perform an advantageous act of courtesy in inviting Lady Caerlavrock and her daughter; and, moreover, to show the two families in one group to an admiring public. On that Tuesday evening, many were the glasses directed to this box. Lady Helena, whom everybody knew, sat in the front, gay and radiant, and behind her, "that good-looking fellow, and as rich as Crœsus too, whom old Caerlavrock has been sharp enough to hook." Olivia's pale handsome face, though partly hidden at the back of the box, excited a good deal of curiosity, and Lady Caerlavrock received several visits during the evening, chiefly to inquire who

the girl in black was. Rupert, fresh from the hands of Mr. Trufitt, made a decidedly successful début. Olivia, perhaps, rather regretted his shagginess, and his growing to look like every one else, but she meritoriously abstained from saying this, for it was quite indefensible. Did she, in her secret heart, acknowledge that it was because some one who was never very long absent from her thoughts was so careless about his personal appearance, that she had grown to love shagginess and shabbiness, and to hate the spic-and-span look of fashionable men? Certainly she had never liked Westbrook's ineffable air of a fine gentleman so little as when he sauntered into the box on this occasion. He took the vacant chair at the back, beside her. Beyond sat Rupert, talking to Lady Caerlavrock, who pronounced him afterwards to be "a very nice young man—so full of information." Kate had secured little Stanridge, an impoverished guardsman (who had recently begun to contemplate the possibility of sacrificing himself, "provided old Pomfret would come down handsome") to flirt with; therefore there was no hope in that quarter of Olivia's freeing herself from Westbrook. She contemplated with annoyance the prospect of his occupying this seat for the remainder of the evening; but there was nothing to be done, except to set her face resolutely towards

the stage, and listen with all her might. In a lull between two of Meyerbeer's stormy choruses, he said,

"I hope you are coming out into the world a little now, Miss Marston?"

"I shall be leaving the Pomfrets shortly," she replied, and turned her head again towards the stage.

"Those are lovely white roses in your hand," he persisted, presently, leaning a little nearer to her. "Do you remember once giving me a white rose? I told you I should always keep it. I always have. It is the most precious relic I possess."

"You must have a large collection," she said, drily.

"No: what is worthless I don't keep. I keep *this* in memory of a time when you were not so cruel to me as you now are."

"Mr. Westbrook, I hate sentimentality."

"Do you call all feeling sentimentality? You would not have done so two years ago. Miss Marston, I want to ask you a question. I hear you once lodged in the same house with Madame Stellino. She is evidently anxious that we should all see that you are intimate. May I ask, have you much reliance on her? I mean, have you implicit faith in all she tells you?"

"May *I* ask, in return, how that can possibly concern you?" and, for the first time that evening, she turned those clear lustrous eyes full upon him. He was not altogether unprepared for some such rejoinder, and yet he felt himself colouring.

"I know something of the lady, though we met as strangers the other day. Has she ever named me to you?" he looked at her askance. "Because I can't help thinking, if so, that it has been to prejudice me in your eyes. She has an old spite against me, and I have too good reason to know that she has absolutely no regard for truth."

It was a bold ingenious stroke, this, of his. He did not for an instant believe that Clara had ever committed the secret of her relations with himself to Olivia's keeping; but he believed, as he said, that she had revenged herself by poisoning Olivia's mind against him; this conviction had grown up more and more strongly in him during the last day or two; and in seizing the bull thus resolutely by the horns, he took, no doubt, a wise course. Even Olivia was, for a moment, staggered. But she quickly recovered herself. Incredible as it might seem that Westbrook should dare to talk to her about Clara in this tone, if he were a guilty man, the secret had been revealed to Olivia in too terrible an hour for her to doubt one word of that story.

She cast about in her mind what she should reply. She could find nothing better than the simplest expression of the truth.

"I *have* heard her speak of you."

Their eyes met for a moment.

"You do not——" he began.

"Olivia," interrupted Rupert, calling across eagerly, "look opposite in the second tier—the fourth box from the stage. Surely I can't be mistaken—I never saw her but once, nearly three years ago—but that must be your friend, my little omnibus beauty."

As Olivia raised her glasses, Mrs. Pomfret, who had heard this, cried out,

"Oh! It's Madame Stellino. Yes. She is a friend of Olivia's. You've met her then, Mr. Marston? A most charming little woman, sings like a nightingale, and so very unassuming."

Rupert made no reply, but kept his glasses levelled at the box.

"Who is that with her?" asked Olivia, who was not the least curious to learn the name of the plain woman beside Clara, but hailed any means of escape from her disagreeable tête-à-tête.

Mrs. Pomfret did not know, but Lady Caërlavrock was able to supply the information. It was Mrs. Cornwallis Methuen, a lady of large and lofty connexion, and very small means. She gave

musical parties in a house so diminutive that, as "the best people" for some inscrutable reason went to her, it was esteemed a high and precious privilege to be invited. She had made Madame Stellino's acquaintance at Lord Dumberly's, and would no doubt get her to sing for nothing at her next party, and make her understand it was an honour. As Mrs. Methuen was always cited as a model wife, and her husband was a tower of the High Church party in Belgravia, and fought the battle of St. Barnabas tooth and nail, it will be seen that Clara had selected her companions with judgment. Mr. and Mrs. Methuen graciously condescended to accompany her to the opera, where they seldom could afford to go unless they were taken, and the world had the pleasing spectacle of virtuous beauty, talent, and modesty, under the shelter of a benevolent pillar of society.

Olivia had succeeded in making the conversation general, now that the first act was over. The two dowagers were agreed that it was a wonderful thing for Clara to appear in public with the Methuens; it was better than twenty lessons. Julian smiled sarcastically, but said nothing. Neither did Rupert, whose eyes scarcely wandered from the box opposite: and at this juncture the door opened, and three or four men came into the box. Of course it was the duty of those belonging

to the box to make room for these visitors, and they did so.

Rupert took Pomfret's arm as they walked down the lobby.

"I say, old fellow, do you mind coming up to that little woman's box and introducing me? I want to know her. We met in an odd way years ago, and she's a great friend of Olivia's."

"You'll meet her to-morrow at dinner. I don't know those formidable-looking people she's with, and I don't think I've pluck to go up there. Besides I really scarcely know her."

"I will take you, if you like it," said Westbrook. There was an ugly smile about the corners of his mouth, but the two men alongside whom he walked, did not see it. "I know her quite well enough to introduce you."

But not even to procure himself this, for which he was possessed by the maddest desire, would Rupert voluntarily place himself under an obligation, small though it was, to Westbrook. He had a vague repugnance moreover, which seemed to him afterwards as though it had been the shadow of things to come, against being presented to that exceedingly fair creature by the man whom he so cordially disliked.

He civilly declined Westbrook's offer, saying that as he was to make the lady's acquaintance

next day, it was unnecessary to trouble him. Then, as the other two men stopped to speak to an acquaintance, he slipped down to the stalls, where, among a crowd to whom he was a stranger, he could stare up at the second tier as long as he liked without attracting observation.

Old Harrington entered the Pomfret box. After he had shaken hands all round and told them the last political "shave," a *bon-mot* of the prime minister's, and other inferior club-gossip, he sat down by Olivia.

"I wish you would not leave that seat all the evening," she said, smiling.

"Oh! If I was thirty years younger, you wouldn't say that! Ho! ho! See what it is to be an old fellow; you all think you can make pretty speeches with impunity. Why, all these young sparks will be wanting to cut my throat if I sit by you all the evening, my dear young lady, eh? Well, and so your brother's come back, I hear, and you're very happy, of course? Saw your aunt a night or two ago; she lost three rubbers, poor old lady, and was in a sad way. Ah! by-the-by, you will be very sorry to hear that Milton has been very ill at Rome."

The old gentleman was fortunately not a very acute observer. He did not see how deadly pale she turned.

"Is he still ill? When did you hear?"

"A few days ago. He had moved on to Naples. He says he owes his recovery, he thinks, to Algy Tharpe's unremitting attention to him, night and day. Good young fellow that, very."

"Do you mean that *he* is with Mr.—— I mean Sir Warwick Milton?"

"Why, didn't you know that, my dear young lady? He went abroad to join him. Queer fish, very, his father. He can't understand what Sir Warwick can find in his son—but I think he's gratified all the same, though he won't own it, that the lad is taken up by a man who so seldom associates with any one."

"It is strange, very strange," murmured Olivia, rather absently; she was not thinking of his last words. "I had no idea of this. I remember now the enthusiastic admiration with which young Mr. Tharpe spoke to me once about Sir Warwick Milton. I am very glad he is with him. It will do him so much good, poor young man."

"Well, you see, the benefit is mutual, if the lad has saved his life." She had thought of that long before he did. With gratitude and wonder she had recognised the strange workings of Providence in binding these two men thus strongly together; but this was a subject upon which she could not speak.

Nothing passed between Rupert and Olivia that evening. He was busy in the city all the next day, and only appeared at half-past seven to find himself the sole occupant of the drawing-room in Eaton-place. He had been there some time—half an hour as it seemed to him in his restlessness and impatience—when he heard another cab drive up. Neither Olivia nor any of the family had appeared; the butler opened the door, and in a tone which accurately denoted the social position of the arriving guest, muttered:

"Madame St'lino."

She came in, looking so shy, and so surpassingly lovely, that Rupert, though he had been thinking of little else all day, felt the blood rush through his veins, and his presence of mind entirely desert him for a minute or two, as he stood there looking at her. She was dressed in exquisite taste, but very quietly; some light gauzy scarf or handkerchief, I suppose affected to conceal the snow-white neck and shoulders, to which it only lent the charm of a modesty that shrunk from too overt a challenge to admiration.

She raised her bright little eyes for a moment, then, perceiving a stranger, lowered them, turned quietly aside from the part of the room where he stood, and sat down on a small high-backed chair.

Rupert had by this time recovered from a hesi-

tation, confusion, call it what you will, so foreign to his nature. He approached her and bowed.

"I must introduce myself to you, Madame Stellino. I am Olivia Marston's brother. I have not forgotten meeting you once, in——"

"Oh! dear me!" she cried, putting out her little hand, "how glad I am to meet you! Dear Olivia has so often talked to me about you, and I remember you quite, *quite* well, only you have grown darker, I think, and a little stouter, haven't you?"

It was subtle flattery, this proving to him how well he was remembered. He smiled.

"I have been abroad and only returned on Saturday. Yes, I suppose I'm burnt; and I got fat on the voyage home. I had a beard, but they made me shave before I appeared in civilised society. I was at the opera last night, and saw you."

"Ah! and how did you enjoy it?"

She meant the music, it is to be supposed. But she met an ardent gaze as she raised her eyes, and the little coquette had no difficulty in rightly applying the sense of his words.

"*Very* much. I have not enjoyed myself for a long, long time as much."

"How handsome dear Olivia looked! What a noble, grand creature she is, Mr. Marston! How

proud you must be of such a sister! You can't think how kind and good she was to me when we lived in the same house. I never can repay it. I never have met with any woman towards whom I have felt as I do towards Olivia. I'm afraid she has grown not to care about me now, but nothing can ever change *me*."

"She wrote a great deal about you in all her letters to me," he began. She looked up sharply into his face, but said nothing. "You know how she has been situated of late, living, first in her aunt's house, and then here, so that she has not been able to see her own friends. You must not think her changeable. Olivia is very staunch."

"Oh, yes; she is all that is good. I feel myself such a poor unworthy creature beside her, but I love her very much. Only I know that such a fine character as hers can hardly enter into all the weaknesses of a poor wretched little thing like myself. You are going to live together, I suppose, now?"

He was replying as Mrs. Pomfret entered. A minute or two later came Kate; and after that the plot thickened rapidly. Olivia was late. When she came down the guests were all assembled. She had only time to shake Clara's hand before they went to dinner, Rupert offering his arm to Madame Stellino, and Olivia falling to the share of

some married man, who talked pleasantly enough to prevent her attention being attracted to the other end of the table. It was at Olivia's earnest request that Mrs. Pomfret had desired Julian to take down this married man's wife, and had so freed Olivia. The lady was plain, and not even amusing: Westbrook did not trouble himself to address a dozen words to her during dinner; but sat, sulky, looking every now and then across the table at Olivia, and greatly distressing his aunt by his taciturnity.

When the ladies rose and left the room, Clara linked her arm in Olivia's.

"How glad you must be to have your brother back again, dearest! He has been so very kind and pleasant. Ah, if I had only a brother—*any one* in the world to care about me! It is so lonely, Olivia, being knocked about by one's self, having no one even to scold me. Do you know I actually miss my poor cross old aunt, though she was so disagreeable at times."

"You seem to have made many friends lately," said Olivia.

"People are very kind to me—much kinder than I deserve. Olivia, have you ever seen that man, Mr. Thompson, since those days? You know, dear, I expected you would have married him."

"So you told me. You see you were wrong."

"I'm so glad. I hope he won't ever come between us again. He is almost the only man who was ever unkind to me. I tried to make him like me, but it was no use."

"I know you tried, and it *was* no use," repeated Olivia.

Clara glanced rapidly round, and lowered her voice.

"Has *he*, Westbrook, ever named me to you, Olivia?"

"Yes, he has."

"What did he say?" she asked, eagerly.

"He wanted to find out whether you had told me anything about him. I needn't say that he learnt nothing from me."

Clara was silent for a minute or two, Olivia would have been sorely puzzled to read the little singer's thoughts at that moment. Presently the latter said:

"Your brother and you are quite like *one*, ain't you, dear? Not like a common brother and sister. How nice that must be!"

"Rupert and I are alone in the world together. We have never had anything to divide us. I pray to God we never may have!"

* * * * *

Westbrook had been playing his *cornet*, with more than usual spasm of eyebrow; and while

murmurs of "So sweet!" "So very soft!" arose round her, Olivia thought, with amazement, of the time when this performance had moved her pleasurably, when she was indifferent to the slight flatness of tone, and penetrated with a belief in the player's true and passionate feeling. It was intolerable to her now. What a relief to her ears when Clara sat down to the piano, and began Schubert's joyous, triumphant burst, "Hark! hark! the lark!" It was like a health-restoring breeze, after all those windy spasms of agony. Rupert sat close to the piano, his eyes riveted on her face. He only sighed at the end, while others crowded round with their compliments. She sang another, and another song: he never shifted his place; he scarcely spoke.

Not till the end of the evening did Westbrook contrive to get near Olivia.

"That's a pretty *tableau*, isn't it?" he said, bending over her, and turning his eyes, at the same time, in the direction of the piano. Clara had risen from her seat; she was looking up at Rupert, who stood beside her, in that pleading, infantile, caressing way which was her deadliest weapon. The expression on Rupert's face, in return, which Olivia caught as she followed the direction of Westbrook's eyes, revealed for the first time, and in a single moment, to her the

presence of a terrible and unforeseen danger. Olivia turned pale, even before she heard Westbrook's laugh and his words—

"Did you ever see such a hopeless case of love at first sight, Miss Marston?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLOUD GATHERS.

It was some days before Mary was allowed to come down-stairs. Those days were uneasy, if not positively anxious ones, with Olivia. After the first painful impression she had received that evening was a little worn away, she tried to think it impossible that Rupert should ever seriously fall in love with Clara. He, who had so much penetration, who was so rigid in his ideas about women, would not be likely to become captive to the fascinations of an actress. Besides (she said in her simplicity), they had few opportunities of meeting: she did not see them together for nearly a week, when they met, casually, in Mrs. Pomfret's drawing-room; Clara was the first pretty woman

he had seen on his return; and he had not yet renewed his acquaintance with Mary. It was thus she comforted herself.

The morning Rupert met Clara in Mrs. Pomfret's drawing-room was the same day that Mary appeared there for the first time. She was pronounced convalescent, and had pleaded so hard to be allowed to take her singing-lesson, that Madame Stellino had been sent for. She was pale, and her pretty complexion was one of her chief beauties; she had on an unbecoming dress, Olivia feared; though she was so fond of the sweet, good little face, that, to her, it was always charming. Still she felt that Mary did not appear to advantage, just on the very occasion when, of all others, it was most important she should do so; and Olivia was annoyed. It was contrary to all Rupert's usual habits to call thus early in Eaton-place, and he did so now, apparently, by accident. His sister forgot that Madame Stellino's coming had been discussed the evening before at dinner.

He came in as Mary was singing. Her voice faltered, and she crimsoned: at last broke down entirely. Then he came forward, and shook hands; and she laughed, and said she was so unaccustomed to sing before strangers, that she was frightened. Madame Stellino told him laughingly he must not interfere with her lesson,—that

he had better go away. But Mary would not hear of this on any account. Then Olivia led him into the next drawing-room, where through the folding-door he could see and hear the lesson going on, and not distract the pupil's attention.

When the hour was over, and Clara rose and began tying her bonnet strings, Mary asked if she would not stay to luncheon? No; she had a lesson in Wilton-crescent, and was due there at one. Rupert came forward, and said that, with her permission, he would escort her so far; but she smiled and shook her head.

"That would never do. I mustn't be seen walking about with smart young gentlemen, must I, Olivia? Good-bye, dear, when are you coming to see me? I am always in at five o'clock. I have no lessons after that, and as I sing almost every night, I take my rest *then*. Mr. Marston found me two days ago—didn't you?—over a novel and a cup of tea, enjoying myself thoroughly. I was quite angry at being disturbed!"

She laughed her little musical laugh, and kissed Olivia; put the tips of her fingers into Rupert's hand, and tripped out of the room. Rupert stayed only a few minutes longer. Somehow or other, Mary seemed to have lost her tongue: Olivia was quite provoked with her. She followed Rupert into the hall, when he was going away:

"Well?" said she, catching hold of his arm,

for he looked preoccupied, and as though scarcely conscious of her having followed him down-stairs; "well, and what do you think of her?"

"Think of whom?" he asked in return, staring at his sister, vacantly.

"Why, Mary, of course—whom should I mean? You know how much I wanted you to—to—see her."

"Oh! She is a nice girl, I have no doubt."

"Don't you think she has a sweet face?"

"She isn't the least pretty."

"You think of nothing but beauty," said his sister, angrily.

"You ask me, my dear, whether I admire her. I'm sure she is a very nice girl, because you like her, but I must say I don't think much of her looks."

"If you knew her better—when you *do* come to know her, Rupert. By-the-by, when are you going into lodgings, that I may come and be with you? I think I have been here long enough now. After the wedding, next week, I shall be glad to get away."

The sister saw that her inquiry was not particularly agreeable to him, though his manner was as affectionate as usual.

"I was looking at some rooms in Sloane-street yesterday, but they would be too small to take you in. I thought perhaps you would

remain here till the Pomfrets left London; and in the mean time I could look out for something larger."

Now, Olivia, with all her faculties on the *qui vive* for detection, did not forget that Clara's lodging was in Sloane-street, nor that her brother had already, as it appeared, found his way there.

"I cannot stay with the Pomfrets so long as that," she said, decisively.

"Very well, my dear. Will you come with me to-morrow, then, and look at apartments in this neighbourhood? I am afraid we shall find them very dear, just now."

Her conscience smote her a little. And, after all, what good could she do? The obvious reply was that as long as she stayed in this house, here he would naturally come, and here he would be constantly meeting Clara; therefore, she argued, it was right that she should leave it. Within the last hour her alarms had been aroused with redoubled force; it was necessary that she should watch over Rupert; she must not leave him a prey to Clara's wiles and coquetries.

"I am not at all particular, you know," she said. "However small and humble the lodging, I shall be quite content with you, Rupert; only I feel as if I did not see enough of you here—we are scarcely ever alone together. When we have some little corner of our own, I have so many things to

talk to you about. To please me, dear Rupert, you won't mind doing this, will you?"

What could he reply? He was too kind by nature, and too fond of her, moreover, to raise up any fictitious obstacles against her wish; and real obstacles, he knew, there were none. He would fain have been free just then, master of his own time, without question or comment, and without the charge and restraint of his sister's presence. But at the root of this lay an undefined feeling, about which he had never reasoned with himself, and which, indeed, he would have found it difficult to account for satisfactorily. This was the vague impression that Olivia would be opposed to his seeing as much of Clara as he wanted. He had no ground for this; she had never spoken to him about Clara: except the doubt expressed by the latter whether Olivia's feelings were not changed towards her, there was nothing to arouse such a suspicion. But the shadow of some such suspicion did hang over his mind. He had been to see Clara three times already; and he had said nothing about it. She had openly, and very naturally, adverted to his last visit before Olivia (for why, indeed, should it be a mystery? Clara was infinitely cleverer than Rupert!), and he had felt rather awkward, in consequence, before Olivia.

With a promise to call for her the next afternoon, he left the house. He did not dine there

that day; and as Mr. and Mrs. Pomfret dined out with Kate, Olivia passed the evening alone with Mary. She had hoped that Rupert would come, but he had told her he was bound to dine with the Claxtons, at Dulwich, and if he got back to town in time, he was perhaps going to a concert. As he did not say where, she did not choose to ask; but it added another touch of soreness to a mind irritated with suspicion.

Mary spoke very little all that day, and she never named Rupert. She moved about the house with less than her usual elasticity; but then, to be sure, she was still far from strong. Her mother remarked how pale and spiritless she looked; the singing-lesson had been too much for her, perhaps? Mrs. Pomfret almost feared that she ought to have change of air. As soon as the wedding, now so close at hand, was over, she must see about it.

Soon after luncheon the next day, Rupert appeared. It was Saturday, and Henry's marriage was to take place the following Wednesday. Mrs. Pomfret, seeing Olivia ready to go out with her brother, and having an inkling of the object of this walk, suddenly cried out,

"My dear, pray stop a minute. I want to say something. I've got a great favour to ask of you. I wonder whether you'll mind doing it, very much? Mr. Marston, I don't know what you'll say to me; but the doctor has just seen Mary, and he says that

she ought to have a change of air—that she won't get better as long as she remains in London. I wonder whether—whether as soon as the wedding is over, Olivia, you'd go down with her and Mr. Pomfret, for a few days, to Milton-Eyre? You see Kate has got several things for the next three weeks which she'll be dreadfully disappointed if she has to give up—so I can't go away *myself*, and poor Mary will be so lonely, all alone with her father, who has business just now in town, which will call him up almost every day, and it would be so kind of you, my dear, if you'd go and keep her company until she's well enough to return, or until we join you there, eh?"

Olivia was a good deal taken aback. To go away and leave Rupert in London just now, was the very last thing she wished. But how could she refuse so simple a request from the people who had been so kind to her? She made a feeble effort to escape, of which she felt the futility, even as she made it.

"I will do anything for Mary; that you know, dear Mrs. Pomfret, but it seems rather hard on Rupert to—to leave him, immediately on his return, and just as I was hoping to make some little home comfortable for him."

"Nonsense, my dear Olivia," broke in her brother. "I can wait six weeks, or six months, for that matter, and you mustn't think of refusing

Mrs. Pomfret on my account. I'll run down and see you whenever I can, and really you are much better out of London just now. It's getting very hot—and as you don't go into society, you'll be much happier in the country."

"I hope Mr. Marston will feel himself quite at home *here*, my dear, and come in as often as he likes—just as if you were still here; and when we all leave London next month, why perhaps he will be able to get a holiday and come down to us, eh? I'm sure we shall be very glad if you can; and then, you see, Mr. Marston, you needn't think about a lodging for yourself and Olivia till late in the summer. I think that will be a very wise arrangement, and really my dear, I shall be quite obliged to you—you will be doing me a real service if you'll go with Mary now."

Of course, after this, all further resistance was useless.

The brother and sister went out together. She asked him to take her into the park. She felt that she ought to speak to him, and she must seize this opportunity of doing so—it might not occur again; and she could not leave London without a word of warning. But she found it harder than she thought to say what was at her heart. She knew not how to begin. Though ashamed to be influenced by such trifles, she felt the sort of day and the hour to be adverse to the frank unbur-

thening of her heart, to the approaching a subject so difficult and delicate as that which hung like a cloud between her brother and herself. Had it been a still and pearly morning, or the quiet end of sunset, over woods and fields, she could have spoken more easily. But it was a brisk May day; a light wind drove the white piled clouds, like flocks of sheep, across the pale blue field above her head; it angered the whole surface of the Serpentine beside which they sat into scale armour of a glistering cold steel; it bustled among the elms; and when added to it was the noise of ducks, and children, and nursemaids, and the distant grind of wheels, the unquiet all around them obliged two persons, sitting on one bench to raise their voices in order to be heard.

Rupert, on the other hand, only wanted an opening, which he could not make for himself, to begin talking of Clara, and to ask his sister many questions concerning her former friend: above all, to learn, beyond doubt, what Olivia's present state of feeling towards Clara was. His frame of mind was one not uncommon under such circumstances. He was irritated at Olivia's silence on a subject which he himself shrank from approaching. Their relations, as brother and sister, had always been unusually close. Olivia had been accustomed to speak her mind, on most matters, without reserve,

to Rupert; if he did so less to her, it was but natural, seeing the subjects which mostly occupied his thoughts were not of a nature to suit or interest a girl. He had been a hard worker all these years, turning aside from paths of dangerous pleasantness with a resolute will. His hour of supreme trial was now come. Women had fastened themselves on him ere this, and he had shaken himself free of them; he had been nigh succumbing more than once to the deadly fascination of beauty, and had escaped. Would he do so now? He had lived away from women for the last two years; he had grown almost as impressionable as a boy again to the seductions of physical charms. He was becoming more and more intoxicated (he knew it himself) by Clara's fascinations. It was but a fortnight since he had first seen her at the opera: she had scarcely been out of his thoughts since then. It was more than a case of love at first sight—it was fairly a possession. When present, the influence she exercised over him he dared not own to himself; he felt helpless before it. And though, in solitude, some measure of calm reason returned to him, it was as the calmness of the shore, over which wild waves have washed, ribbing the erst smooth sand up into hillocks, and strewing it with splinters of a wreck.

He wanted, then, as I have said, to talk of her; and he was annoyed that Olivia, usually so free-

spoken, would not do so. If the two sometime-friends had quarrelled, he would have preferred his sister's open abuse of Clara to this studied avoidance of her name. He did not feel as many brothers, similarly placed, would have done—indifferent as to Olivia's sentiments on the subject; quite the contrary; though, possibly, when weighed in the balance with his passion, all fraternal considerations would prove light indeed. He had not been—nay, he could not now be—open about Clara. It was this, no doubt, that made him hesitate to begin the subject which he wanted to hear his sister discuss unreservedly.

They had walked round the park, and their conversation had consisted of a few disjointed sentences; and now they were sitting on a bench by the Serpentine, and had been so for half an hour, without the interchange of anything more interesting than a casual remark or two upon the boats before them, or the children shouting round the water's brink.

The clock of St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, struck the hour.

"That is five o'clock," said Rupert.

She looked at him, with compressed lips, guessing what was to follow.

"You promised to call on your friend, Madame Stellino, didn't you?"

"No. I made no such promise, Rupert."

"Why have you never yet been to see her?" he asked, with a sudden effort. "She feels your neglect. And now that you are living among rich people, especially, I should have thought you'd have been anxious to prevent this."

A half-pitying, half-sarcastic, smile flitted across Olivia's face, ere she replied:

"I don't think Madame Stellino attributes my not going to see her to the fact of my being in Eaton-place for a few weeks. Indeed, I think it probable that in reality she doesn't trouble her head about it. She has been taken up by a number of great people—which is much more to the purpose. I could do her no good."

"I can't say your charity is developed during the last two years, Olivia. But you women are all alike, so unjust towards each other. It seems to me that a more simple-minded, unworldly creature doesn't exist than this little Madame Stellino."

"So I supposed, my dear Rupert," she said, rather sadly.

"What do you mean by 'so you supposed'?"

"That you believed her to be all that, or you would not admire her as much as—as it seems you do."

"I *do* admire her," he replied, fired at last to speak boldly. "I can never believe that she isn't all she looks."

"Then it is useless my speaking."

"What have you got to say against her? I suppose you've had some absurd woman's quarrel?"

"We have had no quarrel. I believe Clara is even fond of me, in her way—was so once, certainly, and I can very truly say, I pity her—pity her from the bottom of my heart. The early training, the circumstances of her life have, no doubt, tended to make her what she is. Don't think I would be hard on her, Rupert. There are good points in her; and had she fallen into the hands of a good man, whom she loved, years ago, she might have been a different woman. As it is, all the bloom of truth, and fine perception of right and wrong, is rubbed away. She is a clever little creature, an accomplished actress—very little else."

"And pray, how have you arrived at this very uncharitable decision about her? What proofs have you to give that she is false and hypocritical?"

"None. I can but ask you to believe me, when I tell you that I know her better than I know any other woman in the world; and that, alas! I have no respect for her."

"For God's sake, speak out. Don't deal in this kind of inuendo. There is nothing so hateful as stabbing in the dark."

"I can't speak out; my lips are sealed. Dear, dear Rupert," she said, tremulously, and took his hand in hers, "won't you believe me? Do you think I would speak thus, without good cause? This woman is like one of the sirens of old, luring all men who come near her to their destruction. I will not say," she added with hesitation, as Westbrook crossed her mind (and though it might detract from the force of her warning, she would not keep back one iota of the truth), "I will not say that she has not suffered cruelly at the hands of a man. She *has*, poor creature; but I fear it has only hardened her heart. Her vanity now takes its revenge on every man whom she captivates, and she has no moral delicacy of perception —absolutely none. She sees no harm in taking presents from all sorts of people ('anonymous' she used to call them) and in accepting money from —from those whom she had every reason to loath and despise. What do you say to that? Isn't that enough?"

"A woman circumstanced as she has been," he said, after a pause, "must not be judged by the ordinary rules of society. I have no doubt all this, which seems to you so shocking, could be explained satisfactorily. I——"

"But when I tell you that she was every day coming out in some new piece of finery, and

always telling me it was an anonymous gift! It is impossible you can defend or explain that away. Would you like your wife to receive such? Ah! Rupert, if your eyes were not blinded, you would be the first to say that nothing can palliate this sort of thing. It hasn't the excuse of passion; it is——but, oh! I can't speak about it. God knows I wouldn't be hard on her, Rupert, if I thought she had any principle. I know she has none."

He said nothing; but sat with his eyes fixed on the shimmering water before him. Three weeks ago he would have scouted an unworthy suspicion of his sister. Alas for poor human nature! his passion for another woman now made it possible for him to entertain such. He attributed all she had said to feminine jealousy; and he had not far to seek for a probable cause. This Crichton, under the guise of an artist, who now proved to be a baronet, there was no doubt had made a great impression on Olivia. Her voice, her face, her manner, when she spoke of him, all had betrayed her to Rupert; and it seemed clear, from her proud endeavour to conceal this, from the stress she laid on her *friendship* for him, that the pseudo-Thompson had himself manifested no warmer sentiment towards Olivia. But to Rupert it seemed impossible that this man should have been for months

under one roof with Clara, without being enamoured of her. Was not this the clue to Olivia's soreness of feeling, to her injustice, to her perverse blindness? These two people and she had lived in the same house: some circumstance, which her jealousy had distorted, was at the bottom of this dark mystical talk about Clara. It is difficult to understand how, loving his sister and knowing her as he did, this interpretation of her conduct should have seemed possible to Rupert. The fact is, that on any other subject but this his loyalty and his penetration alike would have forbidden it, but the glamour around this little creature had bewitched him already to that extent, that he was ready to believe anything rather than give up his faith in her.

At length he rose.

"You need have no fear for me, Olivia. I wasn't born yesterday, and have some discrimination—some perception, I hope; not to be caught so easily as you seem to think." (When was there ever a man thus boastful who was not weak about women?) "At present I can't say that I am inclined to accept your estimate of Madame Stellino as just. But I shall watch her carefully: I promise you that. And let me advise you, in return, to free your mind of any prejudice you have conceived against her. People change with

circumstances: try and forget, now, any petty cause of difference that may have existed between you, and judge her in a large-minded spirit. Come with me, and call on her, in token of your forgiveness, will you?"

"I've nothing to forgive, Rupert. Clara never did me an injury. But since you wish it, let us come. Only, my brother, remember this: as you warned *me* two years ago, so, dear, I warn *you* to-day. Your warning came in time to save me from a fate which I shudder to think of. I hope mine mayn't be too late."

CHAPTER VII.

CLARA, A MODEL AND A SHINING LIGHT.

THEY stopped at the door of a small house in Sloane-street. The maid, in answer to their inquiry, said Madame was at home, and proceeded to show them to the first floor. But the staircase was narrow; and a high-church young curate, who was coming down at the same moment, had to squeeze himself against the wall, within even smaller limits than those into which his narrow tight-buttoned garments habitually constrained him.

They found Clara in the neatest of little drawing-rooms. There was none of the stagey untidiness which had used to reign in her end of Mrs. Crosbie's room. All that was changed now. The canary twee-tweeing in the window, the open

piano, and two or three bouquets on the tables, were the only points of resemblance. A pile of tickets for a charity concert, the prospectus of some Dorcas society, a dozen or more of invitations, with letters begging for Madame Stellino's invaluable assistance in aid of the funds for &c. &c., covered her writing-table. She was not sitting at her writing-table, however. She was near the window; and the workstand beside her, instead of being covered with beads and tinsel, or other materials for "vain adornment," as her deceased aunt used to call them, was covered with shreds of coloured cotton, out of which Clara was making a patchwork quilt for some old woman. She had taken off her dust-soiled, lesson-giving gown, and was in a cool white dress, which Rupert thought ravishing. He had become dead-sick of white in the West Indies, but his taste for it revived in Sloane-street.

"How kind of you, dear Olivia, to come and see me! You have just missed Mr. Abiram—indeed, you must have met him on the stairs—such a good young man: he has been to me about his schools. He is getting up a concert, as they are in a bad way, and I promised to sing for him; and, poor young man, he is so grateful, I really thought he would never get up and go away. Talking about concerts, Mr. Marston, you never

came to Saint James's Hall last night? I couldn't see you anywhere."

"I tried, but couldn't get back from Dulwich in time. When I drove up the concert was over, and you were gone."

"*Some* people would have given up their dinner, but of course I have no right to expect *you* would; have I, Olivia? And so my ticket was wasted. Well, I'm sorry I didn't give it to some one else. Dear Olivia, you look pale—are you not well?"

"Quite well, thank you. What is that you are making?"

"Oh, something for a poor old woman who is bedridden. I go about in this district sometimes, when I have a spare hour, with Mrs. Cornwallis Methuen. She is such a charming woman. You don't know her, do you? I think she said she didn't know the Pomfrets; but now that they are to be connected with the Dumberlys, she supposed she should make their acquaintance. I told her how very nice the girls were—the youngest particularly. How is she, by-the-by, to-day?"

Clara's patronage of the Pomfrets irritated Olivia exceedingly.

"She is far from well. She does not recover her strength, and is going to leave London immediately after her brother's marriage, on Wednesday,

so that I am afraid she will not have any more lessons of you this season."

"I am really very sorry. Not for the lessons, I needn't say, for I have more than I really know how to manage—but for the poor girl's sake. She is so nice—really almost pretty. Don't you think so, Mr. Marston?"

"Yes—no. I can't say that I do, though I'm told I ought." He glanced at Olivia as he spoke, and Clara had a shrewd suspicion of her own confirmed.

"There is no accounting for men's tastes, is there, Olivia?"

"Indeed, you may say that," she replied. "It seems very seldom that they can appreciate what is best and most worth admiring, I think."

"Yes," said Clara, with her head on one side, as she finished putting in another patch, and regarded the general effect of her work. "You know my opinion of men long ago, dear. You know that I look on them all—without exception—as selfish monsters, who are never to be depended on, who think of women and treat them like painted dolls. Ah me! Yes, Mr. Marston, I am quite in earnest. I dare say you are as bad as the rest."

"Would you condemn me unheard?" he said, smiling. "Wait till I am on my trial."

Olivia chafed and fumed under this: she regretted now that she had come. To sit by and listen to all this angling and dangling was more than she could stand.

"Have you found a lodging yet, dear?" asked Clara, suddenly looking up. "Your brother told me you were thinking of one in this street. I hope it suits?"

"Oh dear no; and I never had any wish to come into this street. However, our lodging-hunt is stopped for the present, as I am going away."

"Going away! why, where?"

"To Milton-Eyre Abbey with Mary Pomfret; and I shall be there, at all events, until the family leaves town, I fancy; as I don't think it likely she will be strong enough to return to London gaieties. So my brother and I can't take lodgings just yet. When do you leave town?"

"Not for a long time, I'm afraid. I shall be here till the end of all things, I suppose: Mr. Abiram and I will probably be the two last souls left in the deserted city: we must console ourselves as well as we can. Ah, dear Olivia, we poor professionals have a harder life of it than you think for. When you are all having your holiday among fields, or by the sea, that dreadful treadmill of the provinces will have to begin. Bath one night, Cheltenham the next, and so on. Oh! how sick I am of it!"

"You ought to give yourself a rest, I'm sure you ought," said Rupert, earnestly. "You'll wear yourself to death, if you go on constantly at it—in this way."

"Oh, I'm very strong, am I not, Olivia? And I'm sure I oughtn't to complain, when I see other women struggling on. Every one is very good to me; much better than I deserve. The Duchess of Battersea has offered to give me her room, if I like to have a concert, but I declined. I'm a silly little creature, I know, but I didn't feel up to all the arrangement of it. I offered to sing for any charity she liked. And then, Lord Dumberly has been so kind—so very kind! and the Cornwallis Methuens (though of course they're poor, and never can *pay* artists) have been so extremely good in taking me, a poor friendless singer, by the hand. Her uncle, the bishop, has invited me to go there, when I'm in the north—in short, nothing can exceed their goodness. So I oughtn't to complain, ought I, Olivia?"

"No: you have no reason to complain, Clara, certainly. If you don't mind, Rupert, I think I must be going." She rose, and held her hand out—very far out—to Clara. The latter made a little pleading movement to try and get at Olivia's cheek, which maddened Rupert: how could any human being resist the tender supplication of her caress? Yet his sister never responded, never

unbent one jot. "Good-bye, Clara. We are not likely to meet again before I leave London."

Rupert pressed the little widow's hands in silence: but his eyes were more eloquent than any words.

After this visit Olivia was more uneasy, and more irate with Clara, even than before. She was annoyed, too, at having had to listen to and tacitly accept Clara's assumption of her new *rôle*, as the humble and high-minded artist, given up to good works, patronised by duchesses, protected by bishops and high-church curates. All the benefit Olivia had gained, she was well aware, by this visit, was to appear, in Rupert's eyes, more harsh and uncharitable than ever, beside Clara's saintly cheerfulness and imperturbable sweet temper. Knowing her as she did, it made Olivia sick to see this simple brother of hers bamboozled by an artful woman. Oh! if she could but reveal to him all she knew of Clara's past! If she could but show him the false wife, the neglectful mother, the heartless coquette—if she were but free to paint her whom Rupert believed to be an angel of purity in her true colours! But, for her oath's sake, she could tell him no more than she had already told. Only a case of life and death could justify the rupture of such a promise, the betrayal of such a trust. And now she must

go away, and leave him to be entangled more and more hopelessly in the toils!

The wedding was a very grand business. A bishop (Clara's bishop it was), with the help of two other gentlemen, tied the knot which made Henry Pomfret and Helena Donnel man and wife. After the ceremony Lord Dumberly gave a breakfast, as Lady Caerlavrock's house was much too small for any entertainment of the sort. What with Scotch cousins and intimate friends, the guests were swelled to nigh a hundred. Rupert, as "best man," had to propose the healths of (or return thanks for, I really forget which) twelve smiling and blushing bridesmaids. And the Duchess of Battersea, who sat nearly opposite Olivia, asked, very audibly, who the young man was, because he really acquitted himself very creditably indeed. Mr. Cornwallis Methuen, who was beside her, supplied the information; and then the blood rushed into Olivia's face when he added (forgetting that the sister was within earshot):

"He is a most devoted adorer of our *protégée*, Duchess. He follows her about, wherever she goes, I believe. She is an old friend of his sister's, and he is a most estimable religious young man—so she told me when I met him there one day—for she is so discreet, so very careful in her

conduct, that she wouldn't admit any one whom she hadn't a high respect for. I couldn't help smiling, and so did *she*, at the young man's dumb admiration—quite like the devotion of a dog. I have watched him since, at two concerts. She doesn't give him the least encouragement. And, indeed, I think she can do much better for herself —really such a charming person as she is, so gifted, and so very highly principled, ought to make a good match, if she retires from public."

"It is very delightful," said the duchess, shaking her head gently, "when one finds that sort of person with good principles. And it is really quite beautiful, the way in which she is ready to devote her talents to any charitable object. And so remarkably well conducted, too. I never have seen the slightest approach to levity. It is quite pleasing to encourage so very modest and attractive a young woman. I assure you I quite take an interest in her welfare, Mr. Methuen."

"You are always so ready to befriend really deserving persons, Duchess, that I was confident you would take up Madame Stellino."

"Yes; and I quite agree in all you say about her marrying again. Being so very highly principled, there is no reason she shouldn't marry *well;* some rich old man, like Sir Richard Pytchley, for instance, who is mad about music. As to this

young Mr.—what is his name?—I suppose he has not got *much?*"

"No: I inquired, and he has very little at present, but he is in the City, which I suppose means money by-and-by, as he is very steady and industrious, I am told. Ah! the bishop is going to speak again."

Olivia did not listen to what the bishop or any one else said during the rest of the time she had to sit there. To think that Rupert should be thus discussed; that Clara should venture openly, and with a smile of compassion, to canvass him and his prospects; and, that these people should actually decide that he was not good enough for her! It made her blood boil again. She longed to let her brother know the way in which they talked of him; only that she knew it would be bootless. Rupert was of too robust a temperament not to be impervious to everything that might be thought or said, in a case where he felt strongly. He was even capable of arguing with his sister that it was very natural his worldly prospects should be discussed by Clara's friends in this manner. Olivia, whose own view of the subject was no doubt somewhat distorted by her private prejudices, while she smarted under all this twaddle, which she felt she ought to despise, knew her brother too well to imagine that he would care a brass farthing about

it. While he had been speaking her eyes had sought pale little Mary among the cluster of her sister bridesmaids, all lilies and roses, at the further end of the table. Olivia had watched the delicate colour rising in the girl's cheeks, as, with eyes bent upon her plate, she listened to his speech. Of course it was jocose; usage demands that all such performances should be so, and Rupert was equal to the occasion. The eleven other bridesmaids laughed immoderately, and the rest of the room applauded and echoed the laughter. Under cover of all this noise, perhaps no one but Olivia marked that Mary did not laugh; that only a thin, watery smile flitted over the poor child's face, in which was no joyousness. If Rupert was the cause of this, he was certainly the innocent cause—as innocent as any man could well be; yet Olivia felt that this sad little face aggravated her indignation against him. How men could be so blind! she said. How they could pass by pure gold like this, in their mad chase after worthless tinsel!

An hour later all the grand company dispersed, after seeing the bride and bridegroom fairly off, and giving them a "God-speed" on their life-journey. The Pomfrets went back to Eaton-place, where Rupert joined them. At five o'clock Mary and her father, with Olivia, were to leave for

Milton-Eyre, and this was the last opportunity the latter would have of speaking to her brother, perhaps, for two or three weeks. But what was there left for her to say? Was it even wise to say anything to him on this hateful subject at present? Accident might happily open his eyes; argument, however eloquent, without facts, without *proof*, never would do so. As he stood beside her at the window, watching the luggage being put on the cabs at the door, while Mrs. Pomfret was pouring a few last injunctions into Mary's ear in another part of the room, Olivia felt that the moments were flying in which it would be possible to speak. She watched, with her fleshly eyes, the cabman and footman struggling between them to heave up a huge gown-box to the top of the cab; but her mental eyes beheld Rupert at Clara's feet. He talked to Olivia of indifferent matters; of the wedding breakfast, and the bishop's speech, but there was a constraint in his manner which was very apparent to his sister. He was clearly anxious to avoid any closer and more personal topic, and she felt that it would be unwise to press it on him. But one thing remained: to try, by some means or other, to get him down to Milton-Eyre, away from London—away from Clara. There, in a purer atmosphere, surely the sweet and subtle charm of Mary's presence must work its

effect, and counteract the poison he had lately imbibed.

"When will you come down and see us, Rupert?" she said.

"I've taken so many holidays since I arrived, I suppose I must return to steady work now."

"Sundays, at all events, you can get away."

"Well, yes; but then, you see. . . . Perhaps on Sunday week I may be able to come down."

"And you will arrange with Mr. Claxton about getting a long holiday—which you have certainly earned—when the Pomfrets leave town, and you'll accompany them to Milton-Eyre—you promise me that?"

"I will see about it. I can't actually promise."

"I think you *owe* me this, Rupert," she replied, with some warmth. "I wouldn't let you come home when you offered to do so. I have always deprecated your making any sacrifice for me. And now, when I ask of you so small a thing as that you should spend a few weeks with me at our friends' house, you hesitate."

"Well, I will come," he sighed;—"that is, if I possibly can."

"If not, I shall return to London. I can't remain there all the summer without you. Mrs. Pomfret says they are to be down in three weeks' time, at latest. Immediately she comes, there

will be no further necessity for my remaining with Mary. If you can't join me, I shall return to you."

Rupert's reply was interrupted by Mrs. Pomfret coming up to say that it was time to be off. Then ensued bosom-claspings, and hand-squeezings, which could hardly have been more fervent if the young ladies had been bound for India. Rupert escorted them down to the cab, where Mary put a fluttering little hand into his; and Olivia, whose face was clouded with anxiety, let the sun shine out on it, for an instant, by showing a smile at the window, as the door was shut, and they rattled away.

He stood there, with his hands in his pockets, looking after them; then drew out his watch. It wanted a quarter of five. With eyes bent on the pavement, he turned his steps slowly in the direction of Sloane-street.

CHAPTER VIII.

MILTON-EYRE ABBEY.

It was a ripe golden evening, that twelfth of June. How good the honeysuckle in the hedges smelt, after the hot day, and the sweetbriar in the cottage-gardens, as Mr. Pomfret's carriage drove through the narrow lanes: how peaceful and pleasant it all looked, after the turmoil of London, and how hard it was to believe that vice, and cruelty, and wrong were not strangers to this tranquil scene, any more than in the great seething city! There were labourers coming home from their work in the fields, and wives with bunches of rosy children, waiting at open doors to greet them, and old age, with its pipe or bit of knitting in the porch, and sunburnt youth, in its smock-frock, staring clownishly out over the gate at "the folk

a-ridin' by." Every country sight and smell was a delight to Olivia, after her long imprisonment in London. She already felt lighter-hearted, more trustful in the future; though, perhaps, she would have been ashamed to own to the effect produced by purely physical causes.

One thing, however, she was not ashamed to own to herself. Every object she beheld had a special interest for her. This was *his* country: here, from boyhood upwards, *he* had lived; he knew each tree, each turn of the road; across those fields he had often walked; he was familiar with each of those cottages, and with the names of them who dwelt there. It was astonishing the pleasure these thoughts brought to her: how they seemed to draw her nearer to him. As she passed, presently, under the old lodge gateway, it seemed like coming into the very shadow of his presence. The armorial bearings carved on the grey stone arch were his: and in the iron gate itself were wrought the letters W. M. The drive led through a wild moorland bit of park, with patches of heath, and gorse, and fern, among which a herd of Scotch cattle were feeding; and then, through another gate, into more dressed pleasure-grounds, through which the road wound, like a strait, between two seas of rhododendron, whose billows of dark blue-green were crested with a foam of dazzling lilac

bloom. Above and beyond them, towered stately English trees, with, here and there, some rare Australian pine, or native of the Himalayas, strangely beautiful to home-bred eyes. And after a mile of this the house broke suddenly upon them.

It lay low, like most old places: in the winter, it might be open to a suspicion of damp and gloom. But now, with the aureole of a June sunset round its clustered chimneys, it was a grand building, and pleasant to look upon. Of the abbey itself, only the ruins of an east window with part of its fine traceries remained. To this fragment, the present house had been added, some three hundred and fifty years back. The winds of all those winters had dashed and stained it, encrusting the grey stone with yellow lichens, and eating with cruel teeth into the mullions of the windows and carvings over the wide-mouthed porch. There was a great fish-pond before the house, where tradition made the monks of the abbey, in old time, to have spent their summer afternoons in feeding the carp; and at the back, again, a sunny, rising piece of ground, which still bore the name of the "vineyard" as relic of the same period.

A florid old man, in a white waistcoat, the incarnation of British respectability, was on the steps to receive them. This, Olivia knew, must

be Sanders, an old servant of Sir Warwick's, of whom she had already heard. Though pensioned off, and having a cottage in the village, he had been loth to leave the house where he had lived for forty years, and had condescended to remain as major-domo, in Mr. Pomfret's service, for the present. Of course he looked on "the new people" with a certain contempt: how should it be otherwise? But he did his duty by them, as an honest servant. It wasn't their fault that they were not of the old stock. Olivia felt sure, at once, that Sanders and she would become friends.

They went into a great oak-paneled hall, with a vaulted roof; and all the interior of the house was of a like character; grand and ancestral-looking, and just a thought gloomy. At least, Olivia felt that it would depend on how it was lived in, whether it were so or the reverse; there was no inherent gaiety in the long dimly-lit corridors and vast suits of rooms; she pictured to herself the last wretched Lady Milton, living in her miserable and vicious solitude here; she could not wonder at Sir Warwick's dread of returning to that most depressing old house, burthened, as it was, with terrible associations for him. Nothing but the sunlight of a happy family party could make it a cheerful home.

She did not rest till she had been through the

chief rooms, examining, with especial curiosity, the pictures on the walls, as she went along; lifting her candle so as to catch a gleam of light on the cuirasses, and brocades, and powdered heads of deceased Eyres and Miltons. Mary was too tired, and too indifferent to the subject of the abbey and its ancestry, to accompany her friend; she lay coiled up in the library with a novel in her hand, but I doubt if she was really reading. Mr. Pomfret was immersed in papers at a distant table. It was then that Olivia, taking up one of the heavy silver candlesticks, opened the door of the yellow drawing-room and began her explorations.

Here Sanders, on his evening round of survey through the apartments, surprised her. Rightly conjecturing that the young lady was possessed of a laudable desire to be better instructed touching the greatness and the virtues of the puissant house of Milton, he vouchsafed to expound the portraits, at which he found her intently gazing. In the last room of all there was a comely lady in a murrey-coloured velvet, with no waist to speak of, and beautiful arms, holding by the hand a little boy, as she walked in a garden (represented by dabs of brown and yellow paint, with an occasional spot of vermilion), beyond which an object might be detected, bearing some remote resemblance

to the ruined abbey-window. But it was on the boy that Olivia's eyes were riveted. Could the grave, almost stern-looking man, whose face she knew so well, have ever been the original of this bright rosy-cheeked child? It was hard to believe; but Sanders told her it was so, and then she detected, in the merry brown eyes, some faint foreshadow of an expression which she had seen in Warwick Milton, at moments.

On the other wall, hung two more full-lengths. These, so Sanders said, represented Sir Warwick, grown to man's estate, and the late Lady Milton. They had been painted soon after their marriage, by the great Ringner, some eighteen years ago, I suppose. Allowing for any amount of flattery on the artist's part, Sir Warwick must have been a very handsome young man at that time. And yet, how infinitely Olivia preferred the worn deep-souled face she knew, with its thoughtful brow, from which the hair had receded, and on which care had furrowed two deep lines, to the white polished temples and Hyperion locks, the flashing eyes, and flesh-and-blood beauty of this youth of two-and-twenty. He looked here full of joy and hopeful promise, and—unless the artist had maligned him—just a tinge of pardonable dandyism, in the arrangement of the hands, and the careful carelessness of every detail in his dress. How

much had the man's whole character changed, since such a delineation of him had been possible!

Olivia turned to the other picture with intense curiosity, and stood before it for some time. It represented a young woman in a glitter of satin and lace, winding a string of pearls round an impossible arm, with fingers so taper and fragile, that they seemed liable to snap off under the weight of the beads. There was nothing to be made of the face; whatever individuality it had possessed in life had been smoothed and beautified out of it in transmission to the canvas. The mouth was about half the size of the eyes; the complexion was a fine compound of rose leaves and chalk, utterly unlike the flesh of any healthy girl, with warm blood flowing in her veins, unless indeed in the beplastered condition of a ballet-girl's. There were great coils and curls of golden hair (which recalled Clara's, and might account for Sir Warwick's repugnance to her blonde beauty), and a throat and bust which, though anatomically absurd, represented what, in real life, no doubt was of very perfect form.

Sanders seemed impatient at Olivia's remaining so long before this portrait. He walked away to emphasize his impatience. There was nothing that redounded to the credit of the house to be said of the original—why she had not even given unto it

an heir! Therefore Sanders was silent; he was not one to gossip with a stranger about Sir Warwick's deceased wife.

"Lady Milton must have been very beautiful?"

"Her ladyship *was* reckoned a handsome woman, miss."

"I know Sir Warwick very well, Sanders," Olivia said after a pause, during which she had determined to make this avowal. "He has been my best friend. I know all his history, and I feel the deepest interest in everything that concerns him. When did you hear from him last?"

"Near upon three months since; he was at Naples then, miss. I haven't heard since. I'm in hopes he may come home for a bit this summer."

"You mean come to England? He can't come *here*?"

"He has kep' the dower-house you know, miss —that is, the old Milton Manor as was, better than three miles away, just on the skirts of the park; he hasn't let that along with the rest, just because he *might* come for a bit, now and then; and being a small house, where he never lived with her ladyship, you understand, he don't mind it like this, where he can't abide to stay a night: and so he let it." The old servant sighed. "I wonder what any of the family would say if they

could come down from the wall and speak, to see the old place let to strangers!"

"Why, there's no disgrace in that; and it is better than letting it be shut up, and grow damp. You will find Mr. Pomfret a very good tenant, and a very good master too, Sanders."

"Oh! as for that, I'm sure he is, miss. A better man don't exist, I'm told; only, you see, it seems strange to have any one here as master who isn't of the family. I can't reconcile myself to it yet. I didn't exactly like leaving the old place either, and Sir Warwick wished me to stop and look after things a bit, or else I shouldn't be taking service with new masters, who has been better than forty year in the fam'ly."

Having relieved his mind by this justification of his present position, Sanders was less loath to discourse of other matters.

"You lived here all the time that Sir Warwick was away, I suppose? I mean when Lady Milton was alone."

"Yes; and dreary times those were!" He shook his head, and drew in his lips, as though the talking of it put his teeth on edge. "Very dreary times, miss. He left me in a responsible position, you see. I durstn't go away for an hour; and no one ever came near the place, except it was her ladyship's father, Mr. Finchley, as

used to be the surgeon in the village, till they was obliged to supervene him. It was his bad example as made——. Well, well! she's gone to her last account, and him too. He was took this spring; a merciful riddance, I'm sure. It wasn't much good to 'im, after all, his daughter being rose to be 'my lady.' She hadn't even a child, so as he could call his grandson heir to the property. And now my master 'll never marry again, I suppose; more's the pity! His second cousin's child 'll step into it all, miss, whom he doesn't even know. Well, well!"

"Sir Warwick avoids all ladies' society here, I suppose," said Olivia, after a moment's pause. She wanted to encourage the old servant to go on talking of his master.

"Yes, miss, that's it—that's just it. There be plenty of nice young ladies, among the county fam'lies, but he won't so much as look at any of 'em—scarcely so much as knows them. There's some think that he's made a vow, never to marry a lady who knows that he is rich, with a title, and a grand property. I don't know how that may be, miss, but any ways, he ain't likely to go and marry beneath him *again;* and going about calling himself Mr. Thompson, like he does, without a valet, or anything, it stands to reason, no lady of fam'ly is likely to take up with him. No, I'm

afraid he won't marry again, miss, and more's the pity."

Here Mary's voice was heard calling "Olivia," in the far distance. It was past eleven o'clock, and Mr. Pomfret was going to bed. It had been a very fatiguing day for them all, and how Olivia could go wandering through the rooms at that hour passed poor Mary's comprehension. Mr. Sanders, as was natural, conceived but a poor opinion of Miss Pomfret.

"I dare say she's a good young lady enough," he observed to the land-steward, the next morning, when the Promfret family was under discussion, "but she ain't my style. Too weak and puling, and I can't abide light hair, after the specimen we had of it here. No, I like a fine woman. Now that Miss—what's her name?—Marston, is something *like*. She is a grand young lady. What a carriage she has, and such eyes! And then she's got some intelligence to talk, and ask about things; but the other hasn't got a word to say, but looks as white and limp as a washed handkerchief, without starch."

CHAPTER IX.

COMING TO THE POINT.

In the little first-floor drawing-room in Sloane-street Clara sat alone, about six o'clock one evening in this week. At half-past seven she was to dine at the bishop's—*her* bishop, as she called him—in Bryanstone-square; but she need not begin to dress for another half hour yet. Nearly every minute in her busy day had its own active work; this was the only hour she could sit down and think, and even this was liable to the interruption of visitors. Mr. Cornwallis Methuen had only just left her, after a long and exhausting discourse upon charity-schools and Mario's Faust. She was convulsed with yawns, and, after his departure, gave orders that she should be denied to every one—except Mr. Marston. She called the maid back to

say this. She was half tempted to rescind this order again, for she did not really wish to see him; but it was part of the present line of conduct which she had laid down; the time was but short wherein to reach the "point" to which that line tended, and, however she might ultimately decide to act, she could not now afford, like Titus, to lose a day. Yet she needed leisure for a little calm reflection. She did her thinking, mostly, as the Arabs pile up rings on their spear points, while at full gallop. At night she laid her sunny little head upon its pillow, and fell asleep like a child. Excitement, passion, present success, and future schemings—little, very little, ever interfered with the excellent digestion, and healthy disposition to sleep, to which, no doubt, she was indebted for the dewy freshness of her cheeks, towards the close of a long season. At the end of each day, she lay down to rest, if not "with the answer of a good conscience towards God," at least with that deafness to any questions more sensitive natures might ask; and a self-complacency in surveying the brilliant tournament of the day—obstacles overthrown, prejudices shivered in the dust, applause and rose-wreaths on all sides, not alone from worldlings, but from bishops and holy men; briefly, a delight in the consciousness that she had won golden opinions from all sorts of people, old and young, rich and

poor, which was the centre of action, the pivot upon which the whole woman turned.

Whenever she set herself to think, being an eminently practical little person, it was to some purpose; on things present, or to come, seldom on the past. She had the happy faculty of letting most by-gones *be* very completely by-gones. One topic, one person, only, she never had succeeded in effacing from her memory, as she desired. It was a pity, for the recollection disturbed the perfect working of a machinery which would otherwise have been complete and without a flaw. Yet, on reflection, perhaps I am wrong, and there *was* an inherent flaw in the metal. It was apparently the best cast iron; the soft, unsound spot was that unexpected little vein of a heart, which put out all the calculations of those who thought they read the actress through and through. I have called it unexpected, for it cropped out at times when it was least looked for; that it did not run very deep we, who have watched her after one great crisis in her life, can tell. Not enough of a heart to make her a devoted, miserable woman; not enough to prevent her thirsting for other men's admiration, and using every art to obtain it; yet enough to make her return, again and again, to the thought of a man who no longer cared for her, and against whom she had every right to feel the deepest re-

sentment. He had treated her heartlessly; she ought to feel the greatest contempt for him; she acted as though she did so. Yet she thought of him more than she did of any one else. Every day she found herself drawing mental comparisons between him and other men; with Rupert, for instance. In Clara's eyes, the comparison was fatal to the latter. He was a brave, honourable man; had a noble, unselfish nature; would never have acted as Julian had done; but he lacked that aristocratic beauty and bearing, that indefinable charm, dashed with superciliousness, which were so eminently attractive to Clara. Beside Julian, Rupert looked clumsy and thick-set, and all the moral qualities in the world could not make weight against the physical charms of height and strength, and an admirably proportioned figure. Hers was essentially a nature to be influenced thus; Westbrook was the only man she had ever cared for, and when she remembered the time that he was at her feet, when she thought that had she then resisted his passion she might now possibly be his wife, her heart was full of bitterness. She would have been a faithful wife to him; she could have made great sacrifices for him; and I believe if that task could have been pointed out to her, by the accomplishment of which she might have won back his love, she would have journeyed to the

world's end to achieve it. She had gloried in her triumphs lately when she and Julian had met; it had been sweet to her to show that others could appreciate her, if he could not; to parade before him her intimacy with that woman to whom her sharp eyes at once saw that he had transferred his allegiance. She acted the part of oblivion and indifference like an accomplished actress, as she was; and if she did not altogether succeed in imposing upon Westbrook, it was rather that he believed in her deadly animosity, than that he suspected her of the folly of any lingering fondness for himself. He was profoundly incredulous as to her capacity of caring for anything in heaven or earth, except her own little self. It had been a case of "diamond cut diamond," and all was at an end long ago between them. Her crossing his path at this juncture was a great bore; it might even seriously interfere with his prospects. He was, therefore, most anxious to discredit her in Olivia's eyes, by proving to the latter what an *intriguante* Clara was. It was on this account that he had found a peculiar and malicious pleasure in pointing out the toils which she was evidently spreading for Rupert. Each time they met he watched Marston's entanglement becoming more and more hopeless, and he smiled. He knew quite well that she cared nothing about the young man; it all tended to confirm his

convictions touching her, and, inasmuch as he saw that Olivia's suspicions against her quondam friend were roused, Julian was well pleased. Certainly this was not the result Clara desired to bring about; so far she had failed. And she knew it, yet she had not quite lost all hope. It might be yet possible to arouse his vanity and excite his jealous love of success, by the knowledge of other men's devotion. So she thought; but yet, she was far too practical to allow a chimera to stand between her and the prospect of worldly advancement, ease, and comfort. A marriage with Rupert Marston in his present circumstances would, perhaps, scarcely seem to present this prospect, but he was a rising man, was sure to be a rich one some day; in Clara's position, such a marriage was not to be despised. And among the motives which actuated her in encouraging Rupert may perhaps have been the feminine triumph of winning Olivia's brother, in spite of the warnings which (Clara's unerring instinct detected) were employed against her. She had been anxious, however, not to alarm Olivia, if possible, and, before her, had always treated Rupert's admiration as a matter of course—a species of homage to which she was too much used to treat it as of any special importance. She talked quite openly, as we have seen, of his visits; referred playfully to his absence at a con-

cert where she expected him; was careful that there should seem to be nothing like concealment on her part; in short, that Olivia should understand it was a harmless flirtation of her brother's, which she, Clara, a little out of pity, and a little out of her friendship for the sister, would not too coldly and cruelly nip in the bud. It would have been enough for Olivia that she knew her quondam friend by this time, to prevent her taking this view of the case: but she also knew her brother. Only once before, in the first flush of youth, had she ever seen him so engrossed by any woman, and she knew that *that* had not been a light matter, without importance or result. It had changed the whole current of Rupert's life; and now that, after eighteen months' exile, he had returned with renewed freshness to civilised society, the impression which another woman had produced was not likely to be fleeting. So Clara reckoned too hastily that, by her artifices, Olivia's suspicions would be allayed. She felt the iciness of Olivia's manner, indeed; but then, ever since the renewal of their intercourse, Olivia had been cold with her. And she had been less and less able to fight against it—to struggle back to the old footing of intimacy: it was not to be. There was one bond between them, a secret which Clara had no fear that Olivia would reveal, even to Rupert; but it was as a

chain uniting two dead bodies, and Clara knew this. All the vitality of her own friendship for Olivia was extinct, though she would fain have galvanised the cold remains into the semblance of life. The hectic existence of what had never been a very natural affinity, had received its *coup de grâce* with the needle point of jealousy. She could not forgive her Westbrook's admiration. It was enough that he should be utterly callous to herself, that he should remain perfectly unmoved by her presence; that, over and above this, he should lay his perjured vows at Olivia's feet irritated her when she thought of it. I have used the needle's prick advisedly to indicate her wound: it was no gaping deadly hurt, but rather the sharp little sting which angers, while we, at the same time, feel it to be scarcely worth our serious notice. For she was far too acute not to be perfectly certain that Westbrook's love for Olivia would never be successful. Still, the venom of outraged vanity rankled in those needle pricks: and a desire for retaliation added another motive to her artful encouragement of Rupert's passion.

This had been the condition of Clara's mind during the past three weeks. The question she had to answer now to herself was, whether she was prepared to marry Rupert, for whom she did not care a rush. Was there any higher prize for

her ambition within reach? She had a number of warm admirers, like Lord Dumberly, who buzzed round her every evening, and would have been content to have buzzed round her all day long, for that matter, if she had allowed them. Would any one of them marry her? Could she bring back Julian to her feet by the spectacle of her triumph over a greater than he? Knowing the man, I believe she thought this not impossible; and for him she would have given up even young Islington, the future Duke of Battersea, himself. Could she bring any of that set to the sticking-point? They would one and all, doubtless, have made her liberal offers of a certain kind; but no one will imagine, I hope, that Clara was likely ever to accept such. The days were past, even, when she levied a species of black-mail on her adorers, and accepted the "too, too solid" incense offered upon her altar. No; she had now risen above that sort of thing; the necessity, born of vanity, and her straightened means, no longer existed; her income, if precarious, was at least sufficient for her daily wants; and she had soared into a region of bishops and curates, where charity and modesty, and virginal simplicity seemed likely to be more profitable than all those outward and visible arts, to which, in a lower condition of coquetry, she had pertinaciously clung.

She had argued the matter backwards and forwards frequently of late; nor could she make up her mind how she would eventually act. She could only make up her mind to this, that she would spare no pains to hook her trout: whether she would land him must depend on circumstances; but once hooked, she could play him to advantage. Olivia's absence this last ten days had been a great gain; still the time was short, the season was drawing to a close; the trout, though foolish and infatuated enough, heaven knows, had done no more than nibble at the bait. In other words, he had not yet asked her to be his wife.

At twenty minutes past six there was a hurried knock at the door. She smiled to herself, and glanced at the clock on the chimney-piece.

"I must go and dress in ten minutes. There is hardly time for him to come to the point."

Mr. Marston was announced. He entered and came up to her arm-chair in the window, with an expression of quiet pleasure in his face, which it was impossible to translate wrongly. He was looking into the eyes of a woman whom he passionately loved. He held her hand—she let it linger in his—for a moment or two: then she said:

"This is kind. I hardly expected you so late."

"Mrs. Pomfret made me go with her to the Royal Academy. I was dreadfully disgusted, but

I couldn't refuse. She has been so kind to Olivia. By-the-by, have you had a note?"

"No: what about? And who from?"

"You know that they go to Milton-Eyre next week, and that I am to go with them?"

"Ah, yes: so I think you said."

"I'd much rather remain here, but I can't get out of it. I promised Olivia I would."

"Pray, why *should* you get out of it, Mr. Marston?"

"Oh! never mind, if you can't guess."

"Well, but about my note? You haven't told me who it's from?"

"I forgot. That note will set all straight, if you will only answer it as I trust you will—as you must, indeed. Mrs. Pomfret wants you to come also to Milton-Eyre."

She looked down at her pretty hands, to veil the sparkle of unexpected gratification in her eyes.

"I? Well, I don't know: it requires a little reflection. I have engagements which may, I think, interfere. I should like it; but, in my position, there are so many things to be considered—whether it is *prudent*—what the world may say—ah! so much to be considered! It would be very pleasant being with dear Olivia. Not that I think Olivia would like my coming: do you, Mr. Marston?"

He flushed, and looked annoyed.

"Why not? Why shouldn't she be glad to see an old friend?"

"Because, alas! dear Mr. Marston, she no longer looks upon me as an old friend. You must know this yourself. Indeed, if you are honest, you will confess that she has tried to prejudice you against me. I'm sure I don't know what I have done. I have never admired, never loved any woman as much as Olivia; and she used to be so different!"

"If my sister has conceived any false impressions of you, Madame Stellino, it is additionally necessary that you should not shun her; that you should disabuse her mind on the contrary. Women are apt to form erroneous ideas of each other. But at Milton-Eyre she will learn to know you better; to see you again with the same eyes she used formerly. I am sure of it."

"Ah! no; I see further than you do. There is a reason"—she appeared to hesitate—"a reason why it is certainly better that I should not go."

"And that is——?"

"Cannot you guess, Mr. Marston? I am sure you can. You know very well to what I allude?"

"Indeed, I don't. I haven't an idea what you mean."

"Well, if you oblige me to speak out, I must

do so, because I have too great a friendship for both Olivia and you to wish to be a cause of misunderstanding between you. You are very kind to notice a poor little singer like me, and I am duly grateful; but it should not, it *must* not, interfere with your duty elsewhere—with those attentions which are looked for and expected in other quarters, where you are bound, by interest, as well as gratitude, to pay them."

"What on earth do you mean? Where are my attentions looked for? and what debt of gratitude do I owe? You are under some strange delusion."

"Ah! no. You cannot think that I am blind to dear Olivia's wishes as regards you and that sweet girl, Mary, who will have thirty thousand pounds, and is, I am sure, very fond of you—very. I know that is at the bottom of Olivia's sudden dislike to poor me. As if I could *really* stand in her way for a moment! But, in my position, it is far better that no one should be able to talk nonsense, to imagine foolish, impossible things, about you and me. You see how frank I am, dear Mr. Marston. You will forgive me, won't you? But you see now how far better it is that I should not go to Milton-Eyre."

Rupert looked fixedly at the roses on the carpet, and tried to decapitate them with his cane.

"You are entirely mistaken—it is quite a delusion about Mary Pomfret. That never has been a question of anything at all between us. It is impossible that my attentions can be 'looked for' there, or that Olivia can have any idea of the sort. Why, I haven't seen her half a dozen times since I returned, and she was a child when I knew her two years ago. As to her money, I hope you don't believe *that* would influence me, Madame Stellino."

"I thought all men married for money," she replied, with a smile, and glanced at the clock. Five minutes were gone.

"To me, at all events, it would be an obstacle," he said, quickly; and, leaning forward, brought his passionate black eyes yet nearer to hers. "If I ever marry, it must be a woman I love, and who loves me well enough to make sacrifices for me. I am poor, and for years she will have to struggle on with but a slender income. But, for my part, I had rather this than that she brought me all the mines of Golconda."

"That is very noble, very disinterested," murmured Clara, looking down. "I am sure very few young men of the world share your sentiments on the subject."

"I should spurn to be indebted to my wife for the luxuries of life; its necessities I hope she

would never want. Perhaps few women—brilliant, admired, with the world to choose from—would consent to such a lot. I know this: but I also know that if ever such a woman *does* consent, it will be because she feels the strength and truth of my love, and that she can, in some smaller measure, return it."

Two minutes of the five were gone.

"Miss Pomfret's fortune can be settled on herself. You will find her all you can desire, and make her very happy, and be very happy yourself too, I am sure."

"Nonsense. Don't talk about her in that way. You must see—you must *know*"—here he took one of the little hands that lay close to his between both his own—"that there is but one woman in the world who can make me happy; that I worship the ground on which she stands; and that if, in time—I would not hurry her to a decision *now*—but in time, when she gets to know me better, if I can induce her to unite her lot with mine, to renounce her brilliant career for my obscure one—if she can ever learn to love me enough to make this sacrifice—I shall be the happiest man alive. All the rest of the world may go to the deuce."

"Fie, Mr. Marston! And Olivia—have you forgotten her? Even supposing this person should ever learn to—to—to see, in short, that it is for

her happiness as well as yours, that she should decide as you wish, would she be justified in estranging you from your dear sister? *She* would never hear of such a marriage, you know."

"Olivia will be reconciled to my choice when she knows it is irrevocable; rest assured of that. She is the best and noblest girl possible, at heart. Contact with snobbism may have spoilt her a little, for the moment, perhaps; she may attach undue importance to social position; but all that will pass away. Hers is too fine a nature, and she is too much attached to me to let such miserable considerations interfere with my happiness."

She shook her head with a sigh.

"Do not lay the flattering unction to your soul. You will have to choose between the two. Olivia will never be reconciled. If you spoke the truth, you would confess that she has warned you against me? Now, hasn't she?"

Rupert coloured, and hesitated.

"Won't you tell me what she said? I shan't mind, you know. It won't alter my affection for her. I know she is under some hallucination about me."

"She has only spoken in the vaguest manner, as thinking you are not calculated for—for—domestic life. Perhaps some little prejudice may exist in her mind because she fancies you received

presents from anonymous admirers, when you used to act. There was no more serious charge than this, I can assure you."

"'One man may steal a horse, while another mayn't look over a hedge,'" she said, shaking her head, but smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"That dear Olivia received plenty of presents herself, worth far more than any *I* ever had, and hers were *not* anonymous; so she might have returned them. But of course, what is shocking in a poor actress is admissible for a young lady in Olivia's position. How just the world is!"

"But you're surely mistaken. Who did Olivia ever have presents from?"

"From Mr. Thompson, the painter."

Rupert said no more. He did not, for an instant, believe this; he knew his sister too well; but it confirmed his conviction that there had been a jealousy between the two women touching the painter. It seemed almost as though in answer to his thought, when Clara said,

"I'm sure she might receive as many as she liked for all *I* cared. But dear Olivia is prejudiced against me. Depend on it, I am right. She would never be reconciled to this."

"You don't know my sister as well as I do," he said, with a confident smile; then added, with in-

expressible tenderness, "and now, will you not promise to come to Milton-Eyre? Will you not give me the chance of teaching 'that person,' if possible, day by day, how to love me? In fine, will you learn to see that you are mistaken about Olivia, and that there is nothing but a transient cloud between you, which my unalterable devotion shall very certainly disperse?"

She rose, with a lovely radiant look, and gave him her hand: he raised it to his burning lips.

"I must send you away. It is time for me to dress for dinner," she said. "Yes, I will come to Milton-Eyre; that is, if my bishop will allow me, and the dear, kind Cornwallis Methuens, who take so much interest in all my plans. How good they all are to me! and you, too, Mr. Marston. What have I done to deserve it?"

With a little friendly smile, and nod of the head, she gave him his dismissal, and rang the bell for her maid.

Nothing could be more satisfactory. She had brought him to "the point." After such words as these, no man could honourably withdraw from the position in which he had placed himself; while she, on her part, stood committed to nothing: free to take or to leave, as, in the fulness of time, she should see fit.

CHAPTER X.

THE MANOR-HOUSE GARDEN.

SOME days passed: Olivia's dread about her brother, if not forgotten, was at least mellowed by distance, and by sundry small circumstances. She spoke comfortable words to her own thoughts when they reverted to the subject. In most of Mrs. Pomfret's daily notes there was mention of Rupert, and none of Clara. It did not appear that the latter had been to Eaton-place since Mary had discontinued her lessons: Rupert was there very often. He himself wrote to his sister, and did not name Clara, while he spoke of soon joining Olivia at the Abbey, for he had obtained his holiday. He was to accompany Mrs. Pomfret, who had settled now on leaving London in a fortnight; so this excuse which he pleaded for not coming down

on the Sunday, as he had promised, was plausible enough. Altogether, Olivia was easier in her mind; though, perhaps, the chief cause of her abated anxiety was to be found in the invigorating country air, in the diversion of her thoughts into other channels, in the strong interest she took in everything around her. When hope, and health, and a power of enjoyment in all God's works are strong within us, we face our dangers and difficulties in a wonderfully brave spirit, or we put them further away from us; and so at least they do not swallow up our very lives.

Mary Pomfret's spirits did not revive like Olivia's; but the rosebuds began to show in her cheeks, and they blew more and more every day. She enjoyed the sweet June weather, in the companionship of her friend, as much as she could enjoy anything just then. She was suffering what many a young girl has to suffer. Absence, and the resolution to conquer a foolish fancy, would in a few months, probably, have succeeded in restoring her to something very like her old self; only with deeper thoughts, and more of insight into life. But this was not to be.

The two girls sat out almost all day in the new-mown hay. Each took her book, and read or pretended to read, for they did not talk much. How could Olivia speak of the conflict of

hopes and fears within her breast to the young girl at her side? Still less could Mary talk to Olivia (of all women in the world) about her secret grief, poor child. Therefore, when they spoke, it was of some cloud-shadow moving, like soft purple wings, across the distant hills—of the summer wind, soughing among ruddy branches of the gaunt Scotch firs—of the dog-roses in the hedges, and the lilies on the pond—of all external objects, and of nothing that lay far down and out of sight.

In the hall hung an old chart of the county, which Olivia one day studied for some time. Upon it, adjoining the vast green tract which bore, at that date, the name of *Eyre Abbey*, was marked a small enclosure to the north-east. This was Milton Manor. Some hundred and twenty years back, its owner had married the heiress of Eyre Abbey, when the estates became one property, as the compound of "Milton-Eyre" attested. Olivia, by dint of much reflection, established in her own mind the relative geographical position of the two houses. Her desire to visit the old Manor, the cradle of the Miltons, the home of Sir Warwick, whenever he should be in England, was strong. Up through the "vineyard" at the back of the Abbey, and along a path which led over the wooded hill, where neither of the girls had yet wandered, was the road

which Olivia knew must lead to the Manor, and which she resolved to follow some day.

The right moment came, one afternoon, when they had been at the Abbey about ten days. Mr. Pomfret had gone early to town. The young ladies had their luncheon alone, without even the stately supervision of Sanders, who had not been seen since breakfast, and was believed to have gone to the village and to be in the bosom of his family. Olivia proposed that they should take a longer walk than they had yet done: she mentioned her desire to see the Manor. About four o'clock the girls took their garden-hats and sketch-books, and strolled up the hill, under the cool green shade of woods. Over the brow, and down the other side, for more than two miles, the path wound on, until they came to a small wicket dividing the estates. It stood open, and they did not hesitate to pass through. A few yards further on, the low gables and clustered chimneys of an old red-brick house rose up from the midst of clipped yew hedges. A light fence separated the wild wood path from this quaint garden.

"Have we any business here?" said Mary, stopping short as they neared the garden-gate. It was ajar, and they looked through to a rich mosaic of flowers—common, old-fashioned flowers, but none the less sweet or brilliant for that, set in

gravel, with high box borders, and relieved by long smooth passages of turf. To right and left of the gate was a long covered walk (*charmille* in old French), of thick and close-clipped yew; an impenetrable shelter from the sun on such a day, having round windows, at distances, cut out of the solid verdure, and no chance for the sun to get in from overhead. It looked so cool and pleasant; besides, the house which Olivia came expressly to see was partially hidden from where they stood at the gate. The temptation was too strong.

"It is uninhabited. There can be no harm in our going in. We can walk down this *charmille*, from which we can see the house better."

She pushed open the gate, and Mary, with some misgiving, followed her. Half way down the covered walk they found a stone bench, opposite one of the peep-holes I have named. Mary said she was tired, and would go no further; nor, indeed, was there any excuse for their doing so; the house, embowered in clematis and Virginian creeper, but with no other special beauty about it, save that of age, which has always a charm, stood plainly disclosed. There was the garden porch, and the sun-dial in front, with great bunches of lavender around it, and a balustrade dividing the terrace from the garden, whereon a couple of old white peacocks were perched. They could see it

all; and, to Olivia's surprise, most of the windows of the house were open.

"Oh!" cried Mary, suddenly, under her breath, "look there!"

Olivia started up, and leant forward. A half inarticulate cry escaped her. She sat down without a word. Sir Warwick Milton, with Sanders at his side, stood within a few yards of her.

"Come away, quickly; we ought not to be here," whispered Mary. Olivia made no reply; she scarcely heard her: there was a singing in her ears, and her heart beat so fast that it seemed literally to be choking her; she could not have moved to save her life. Mary made one more fruitless effort to get her companion away: possibly the low murmur of her voice reached Sir Warwick; he turned sharply towards the *charmille*, and entered it by an archway, a stone's throw from where the two girls sat.

A smile lit up the sombre face, but he did not seem surprised to see her. Except for the thirsty way in which his eyes fastened upon her, and drank in every little change that the months might have made in her face and figure, one might have thought that they had parted yesterday.

She took the hand he held out, and murmured something—she scarcely knew what. Mary stared, wonder-stricken. It was Sir Warwick who first became conscious of a forgotten ceremony.

"Miss Pomfret, I presume? Miss Marston and I are old friends, but she has not yet known me under my true name. I must introduce myself to you both, as the owner of this old house, where I am glad to welcome you. I only arrived from abroad early this morning, and I meant to call on Mr. Pomfret by-and-by."

"My father is in London," said Mary, shyly.

"So Sanders told me; but that he would be back late in the afternoon. Now that you are here, will you not come in and see the old Manor House? It is a curious place, and I should be glad to show it you.

He addressed both the girls; but it was now Olivia who replied, not without a certain hesitation,

"It is too late, thank you. Mr. Pomfret may come back—we must be turning home."

"In that case, you must let me escort you. If Mr. Pomfret is returned, I can pay my respects to him."

They wandered slowly back through the fir-wood, talking of indifferent matter, and naturally keeping very clear of all that lay nearest the heart of either. He asked, with a smile, after his old friend Miss Pringle, and inquired a great deal about Rupert. He told of his own journeyings with Algy, and spoke with paternal affection of that honest-hearted youth, who had now returned

to the far less paternal bosom of his father. Mary took no part in the conversation: she walked on, and listened in silence, pondering over the strange fact that Olivia should have kept her intimacy with the owner of Milton-Eyre such a profound secret.

When they reached a narrow walk in the vineyard, and were but a stone's throw from the house, Mary, who was walking in front, said she would go forward, and see if her father were returned. The two who walked alongside each other, gradually, imperceptibly, slackened their pace.

"And so you are not married, Miss Marston?"

There was a tumult in Olivia's breast, which made it hard for her to reply quite naturally,

"Did you think I was?"

"Yes—no—that is, until lately, I thought it likely. You know what you once said to me."

She looked up into his face. After a moment's pause, she replied in a low voice,

"What I said to you was the truth."

"Then, naturally, when your aunt gave me to understand——"

"What my aunt said was *not* the truth. I guess what it was. Oh, Mr. Thomp——, I beg your pardon, Sir Warwick, how could you believe her? How could you act as you did, solely in consequence of any words *she* said?"

"Why, those words confirmed what I already

partly knew from your own lips. But, besides that, I thought there was some show of reason in what the old lady said, that my presence only tended to keep up the morbid condition of your mind by memories of the past; I saw you were restless and miserable, and I felt the uselessness of remaining, when I could be no longer of any use, and when there was another at hand, whose privilege it was to minister to your wishes, and help you with his counsels."

The tears stood in Olivia's eyes. She shook her head.

"There was no such person. I was alone, and very friendless, all those months, while you would not answer my letters. Ah! you never will know what I suffered in that house, until these good Pomfrets came, and took me away."

He paused, for a moment, in the narrow path, and seemed hesitating what he should say. He looked away from her, and tore a long trail of convolvulus down from a rose-bough overhead.

"Forgive me, if I probe too far; but have you not seen again the person of whom you once spoke?—the person to whom your aunt referred, who had turned out worthier than you believed him? Perhaps I have no right to ask the question; and yet I have come all the way from Naples to ask this, or something like it."

She coloured: but a little smile played round the corners of her mouth. She had not then been self-deceived.

"You have my leave to ask any question you like. As to that person, I *have* seen him. I wish I had not. I wish I could think I were never to see him again. I look back with wonder at myself when I remember how differently I thought once. My feeling—what for a moment I fancied was love—was like this, I think:" she touched the white blossom, with its graceful tendrils, which he swung, censer-wise, in the air, as he walked along —"It looks fair for a moment, but it is only a noxious weed, clinging to anything, and its life is but an hour. I was an ignorant and very enthusiastic girl—that is the whole truth. I made something like a hero for myself of almost the first man I had ever known. I soon learnt to know him and my own heart better."

"And what is your plan of life now?" he asked, gently, after a pause. "You are not going to live entirely with these friends, I suppose. Is your brother likely to marry?"

She turned quickly round.

"Why do you ask? I earnestly hope not."

"Because I was reflecting that, in that case, you would be homeless again."

"Oh," said Olivia, with a touch of her old pride, "I hope I shall not be dependent on the

pity of my friends, if that *should*, unfortunately, come to pass. I mean, if—if my brother should marry any one I don't like."

She said no more, for Mary and her father drew near. But, in her own heart, she asked, "Why does he always return to the old ground? Is it only out of pity, then, that he comes back?" She had been so happy during all that walk—so doubly happy but a minute before. Now, again, the sky seemed overclouded.

Mr. Pomfret greeted his landlord very courteously, and invited him to stay to dinner. They all sauntered back to the house together; but there came a gloom over Sir Warwick's face as they approached it. Olivia, who noticed this, well understood what the first sight of that home, fraught with so many bitter memories, must be to him, after many months' absence. But her attention was diverted to what Mr. Pomfret was saying to Mary.

"Yes, I saw your mother for a moment, my dear; and she and Kate come down by the last train to-morrow. Your brother doesn't come till Saturday, Miss Marston, when it appears they've invited quite a party. Lady Caerlavrock and Lord Dumberly, and Julian, and the little Madame Stellino, who's to give you lessons, Mary, and will sing in the evening, and amuse the company."

Olivia shivered, as though a cold wind had

swept by her. Her fears were being fulfilled. In spite of her present state of excitement on a subject which touched her yet more nearly, her thoughts flew back, with a feeling of intense anguish, to Rupert. She shot a rapid glance towards Mary. The girl was pale; but walked on, looking straight before her.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

In the evening, while the two gentlemen sat and talked "across the walnuts and the wine," discussing farms, and the relative merits of tenants whom Sir Warwick had known since he was a boy, this is what passed between the girls. They sat at the open window, in the library, opposite which the moon was rising over the black ridge of yew trees, and silvering the edges of the fish-pond, among the water-weeds.

"So in three days more, our quiet life here comes to an end, Mary, and we shall have a house full of gay company."

"I am very sorry—I had much rather no one was coming."

"But your singing lessons—you'll be glad to go on with them now you are stronger?"

"I think I have lost all taste for singing. I have not opened the piano since I came here. . . . . You have known Madame Stellino a long time, Olivia—are you fond of her?"

It was the first time since Rupert's return that the little singer's name had ever been mentioned between them.

"No, dear Mary, I am not; she is a woman I have every reason to mistrust. I am very, *very* sorry she is coming here."

"I thought her so charming and simple at first; I suppose because she is a great actress. But somehow or other, lately, I have changed. Without any reason that I know of, I have got to think as you do, I believe. Why did mamma ask her here?"

"I suppose to be agreeable to some of her visitors," Olivia replied, quickly. Then she tried to give her words a general interpretation by adding, "Lord Dumberly, you know, is very fond of her singing."

After that the conversation dropped; and when Mary spoke again, it was to ask Olivia touching her acquaintance with Sir Warwick, and how it came to pass she had never named it.

"I knew him under very different circum-

stances, and passing under another name. I only, indeed, quite lately discovered my friend's identity with the owner of this place. As he had always kept the secret from me, and I had no reason to suppose that, even now, he wished me to know it, I didn't feel myself justified in speaking about it. That is the whole truth, dear Mary."

When the two men came in, Mary made tea; and her father, as he often did, after a hard day in town in this hot weather, fell asleep. Olivia remained in the window-seat, in the quiet moonlight, with the sweet odours of jasmine and honeysuckle borne in upon the dewy air; and here Sir Warwick joined her. Mary, with a woman's instinct, when her tea-making was done, took her work to a distant table, where the lamp stood. Cross-stitch was not to be done by moonlight.

He stood silently, for some minutes, looking upon the silvered water, across the stone terrace, and the steps, and the balustrade, crowned with vases of flowers, clear lit in the sharp moonlight. At last, he said, in a low voice which travelled no further than the embrasure of the window,

"Do you like this? It looks to you peaceful and pleasant, I suppose? To me it is quite the reverse: full of harsh memories. How many moonlight nights have I stood here alone! and—you know something of my past now. You know

why this house is so intolerable to me. If it had not been for you, I could not have brought myself to enter these doors so soon again. I had made up my mind whenever I was in England, never to come near it."

"I am glad you have broken through that resolution," she replied, quietly. "It would be a pity if this grand old place should know its master's face no longer. To me, it seems the very perfection of an English ancestral home. How strange it is to remember you shut up, day after day, in those little lodgings by the river!"

"Some of those days were the happiest I have ever known. You can understand now why it was a relief to me to cast off every association with my miserable past. I wanted——" here he paused and hesitated a little—"I wished very much to have told your father who I was. I did not see, however, that it would do any good. I think he liked me; I think he would have trusted you to me; and I always shrank, with the dread of a terrible experience, from allowing my social position to be thrown into the balance in my favour. With your father's peculiar character, too, I felt that it would be hard to make him understand *why* I liked living incognito. He would have thought it romantic stuff—eminently 'unpractical.' Am I not right?"

"He was very fond of you," she murmured: but she was almost inarticulate.

"I should have suffered in his estimation, however, as a sensible man. Then, Olivia, as I grew to know you better, day by day, and to form, in spite of myself, wild hopes about you, I clung more than ever to the idea of keeping you in ignorance of my name. It was a foolish fancy, for God knows I was very certain it would make no difference to you; but I had registered a sort of half vow on the subject long ago. And now tell me if I am deceiving myself, or whether you can care for a man twice your own age enough to marry him? A hope has begun to rise in me: some words you let fall to-day seemed half to confirm it. I think you know that I love you very dearly." He had got her hand in both of his. "If I am mistaken, you will put me out of my suspense at once: but for God's sake don't let us deceive each other by pride, or any other foolish fancy. You said something of 'pity' to-day. If it be possible that you ever believed that to be my feeling, at least you know better now. I tell you the simple truth when I say that I love you far better than anything I have ever loved in the whole world."

The tears were raining over her cheeks, but she looked up through them into his face, with the

brightest smile. She laid her other hand in his; he wanted no other answer. They were both perfectly happy in that silence for some time, her head leaning against his shoulder, as they sat there in the moonlight; the only sound, an occasional snore from Mr. Pomfret's distant arm chair. "And your vow?" Olivia whispered. "I thought you would never marry any who didn't take you as an unknown painter? You know I refused to be your wife, then. Are you quite sure that it is not because of your broad lands and your old name that I want to be your wife now?"

He looked into her eyes with that candid trustful look which said far more than his actual words.

"I shall keep to the strict letter of my vow, because I believe, because I *know* now, that you did take me—in your heart—while you as yet only knew me as the obscure painter." He fell into her playful tone—for where the heart is full this is no uncommon outlet—as he continued, "Then, by a fine piece of casuistry, I can truly say, you have not seen my home, which is now the little old Manor House, and will be, for some years to come. You know you refused to come in to-day. Was it out of regard to my conscience?"

She shook her head, laughing through the tears she wiped away. "What will Sanders say? Ah! I begin to wish you could have played the Lord of

Burghley, as you intended, to the end. People, of course, will say that I——but oh, I am so happy, I care very little what anybody thinks or says now."

She leant her head again upon his shoulder, and for upwards of an hour Mary could just catch a low continuous murmur from the deep embrasure of the window. It was interrupted by Mr. Pomfret's starting up, with a snort, and demanding the hour. It was past eleven, and Sir Warwick saw the propriety of at once bidding the party good night.

As the girls were going up to bed, Olivia threw her arms round Mary's neck, and told her of her happiness. And in tender women's hearts there is such a sympathy in joy or trouble, that little Mary found the answering tears come very readily, as she listened to all that Olivia had suffered because of her long concealed love for this Sir Warwick Milton.

Olivia's happiness, during the next few days, was too keen, the revulsion of feeling too sudden and violent after her long depression, to which so many causes had tended, for any other subject to occupy her thoughts long. If her anxiety touching Rupert reverted to her mind now, she drove it away. She had no room for anything but joy and gratitude. It was like the lifting of a great stone

from her heart, which had kept out light and air. It was impossible to take a gloomy or desponding view of anything in those first hours, when day was flooding in upon her, after a long twilight. She wrote, of course, at once to Rupert, telling him of her engagement, and begging him on no account to delay his coming, which was now fixed for the Saturday. It was on the Wednesday that Mrs. Pomfret and Kate arrived; and that evening, after dinner, the disclosure was made to mother and daughter. Olivia would fain have deferred this for a few days, but she had no choice. Living under Mrs. Pomfret's roof, she could not meet Warwick unreservedly, and at all hours, without telling her hostess how matters stood between them. The astonishment of the two ladies, as may be supposed, was great. Olivia was quite prepared for the form it took in Mrs. Pomfret's mouth.

"Well, to be sure, my dear, you *have* stolen a march upon us all, and done very well for yourself, I *must* say! Such an old baronet, and such a fine place! Three miles to the park gate. And though he has let it, I believe it's more from eccentricity than because he is hard up. But I hope you'll get him out of those odd ways—painting, and all that sort of thing. You'd better lay down some rules, my dear, beforehand, as to what you expect. Powdered footmen and family prayers—

those two things I should be very particular about if I were you. It's really a great catch for you. I can't think how you managed it—though I always said, with reference to my poor angel, Lionel, that you were made to grace *any* station. I had really quite thought of Sir Warwick for Kate;—things turn out so oddly! I thought, with him at the Manor, and us here, it would be so very nice, if——"

"Pray, mamma, don't talk in that way," said Kate, tartly. "Just as if I were a bale of goods, and it were convenient to dispose of me in the nearest warehouse. I am much obliged to you. Pray have some regard to my feelings."

"Well, my dear, I'm sure you made every inquiry about Sir Warwick, yourself, and——"

"Really, I must beg, mamma, that you won't talk in that way—and before Olivia, too! It's exceedingly disagreeable. But you know mamma's ways, dear, and I'm sure I heartily congratulate you, and think it's the most delightful arrangement. I'm sure he's very nice, or you wouldn't have married him, though he is so rich."

"It's quite like a thing in a book," said her mother; "I always said there was a *Jenny say quor* about you, Olivia, which entitled you to look high." And she shook her head with effusion, while she held Olivia by both hands, at arm's

length, and gazed at her with half-shut eyes, as though rapt in a vision of coming greatness for her protégée. "You certainly did quite right not to take poor Julian, though I thought you were wrong *at the time.* I hardly know what use there is in his coming on Saturday now, though, to be sure, he's always agreeable; and there's Madame Stellino he can play duets with."

Mrs. Pomfret had antedated her arrival, in order to make preparations for the somewhat numerous guests whom she had convened; but Rupert could not get away before the Saturday, from which day his holiday began. Thursday's post, however, brought a few very affectionate lines from him, expressing his unfeigned surprise and hearty joy at the news which her letter had conveyed, and his desire to make Sir Warwick's personal acquaintance, of whom, through Olivia, and by his own letters, he already knew so much. It was quite true: he did most ardently rejoice in his sister's prospects; all he knew of the man she had promised to marry inspired him with confidence and respect; and this man's position would secure to her those solid advantages to which no one, a large portion of whose life is spent in money-getting, can be absolutely dead. Moreover, I will not undertake to say that the leaven of a secret satisfaction at the thought that he was

now more absolutely untrammelled to choose his own course, without reference to a dependent sister, was not stirred in with his avowed feelings of pleasure, and caused them to rise yet higher. There was but one little drawback: he could not reconcile this marriage with a certain theory of his own. Now Rupert clung to his theories.

The greeting between these two men, in the forenoon of Saturday, was a very cordial one.

CHAPTER XII.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

The party met together, in the great crimson drawing-room of the Abbey, that evening, numbered fourteen. There was Lord Dumberly, with his brown wig and double eye-glass, talking emptily of diapasons and diminished sevenths to Clara, who leant forward from the low *priedieu* where she was seated, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes fixed on the wrinkled face before her, with a look of the deepest interest. I doubt if she heard a word the old lord uttered. She was watching, with that power of seeing all without looking at anything which some people possess, Julian, who was alone, and moody, at one end of the room; Olivia, Rupert, and Sir Warwick, who were seated together at the other. Strain her hearing as she

might, she could not catch a word they said, in the din of talk going on around her; nor would their conversation probably have repaid her; but one thing was clear to her very astute perception: a formidable adversary to her many-sided intricate schemes had unexpectedly arisen. In Sir Warwick Milton she of course at once recognised the only man whom she had ever thoroughly dreaded and hated, and on whom she had exercised all her little feminine arts in vain. She had arrived just before dinner; she had had speech with no one touching Olivia (for the engagement as yet was only permitted to ooze out: it was not publicly proclaimed on the housetops); yet Clara had instantly seized the whole position of affairs. Her part in the forthcoming drama—the fifth act of which she had not yet arranged for herself, having two, if not three, possible terminations to choose from—her very difficult part, I say, was rendered doubly difficult by the appearance on the scene of this unsympathetic actor. They had acknowledged each other by a bow across the dinner-table; but if a faint hope of conciliating him flitted across her mind, it quickly vanished: he did not even take the trouble of coming up to speak to her when the men returned to the drawing-room. Before Rupert could reach her, Lord Dumberly had sunk into the great gilt arm-chair at her side. It

was scene No. 1, and like all first scenes, uninteresting, yet full of significance. Behold her listening (as actresses listen) to the words of wisdom that drop from the lips of that bewigged old lord. Rupert enters, dissatisfied, and joins his sister and Warwick.

Kate, and little Stanridge of the Blues (who really has serious thoughts of proposing, only the fellows at mess chaff him so about his future mamma-in-law), are talking together very pleasantly on the sofa. This is what dramatists call their "secondary plot;" and, if all goes smoothly, there is every prospect—the mess being forty miles away—that these young people will come to "an understanding" before Captain Stanridge has been many days in the house.

Lady Caerlavrock, Mr. Pomfret, and old Harrington are seated together. The latter is doing all the talking; the host is a good silent listener, perhaps hardly laughing as much as your teller of good stories likes, but then Lady Caerlavrock is enough chorus for two. In spite of her small grandeurs, she dearly loves a joke, especially if there be just a dash—no more—of impropriety in it. She and the good old bachelor get on capitally together: they have lived among the same people for so many years, and know the skeletons in *all* the cupboards of so many families, that their con-

versation is strewn with hints and allusions to subjects about which Mr. Pomfret knows nothing. To him Lady Caerlavrock is always studiously polite, but their small talk is limited to a narrow range: he has not had the right of way over the social ground which the old bachelor and she have trodden in common. Still, she always speaks of him as "a most excellent man, and so very quiet and unpretending, not the least ostentatious or pushing, while the mother, you know——"

Mrs. Pomfret has a just, if dim apprehension of the light in which her ladyship regards her. She is not fond of Lady Caerlavrock; but it is well in the eyes of that great task-master, the World, that Lady Helena's mother should be known to be a guest at the Abbey; therefore she has been warmly pressed to come, and, as it happens to fit into her ladyship's visiting arrangements, she will remain here a fortnight. Mrs. Pomfret is whispering to Julian, on the ottoman, with a hand-screen held sideways to her mouth, to prevent any chance wind from dispersing a grain of her precious words. It is "a dead secret"—the secret which half the house knows, and half already guesses—which she is thus ostentatiously pouring into his angry and astonished ears, with strict injunctions that he is "to let her confidence go no further." Julian's face, and the impressive movements of his aunt's

cap and curls, behind that pregnant hand-screen, convey to all present a very shrewd suspicion of what is passing. Julian looks at Sir Warwick more attentively than he has done during dinner, and cannot, for the life of him, see what any woman could discover so wonderfully fascinating about the fellow. For Mrs. Pomfret has told him —she says she "thinks it but right that he should know"—all *she* knows of Olivia's long though unacknowledged attachment to Sir Warwick, when the young lady believed him to be only an obscure painter. Sir Warwick has the advantage of Julian. He already knows him by sight. He has seen him twice. He knows nothing of Julian's history. He very little guesses that this is the man whose relations with Olivia (such as he misconceived them to be) caused him, Warwick Milton, so many months of misery; but he sees him there, on terms of the most freezing courtesy with Mrs. Elliston—whom he now hears called Stellino—and Sir Warwick retains a very distinct recollection of a certain evening in the Strand, sixteen months ago. Olivia prepared him for this woman's arrival; and though he knows, from the few words Olivia has said, that the intimacy between Clara and herself is a thing of the past, yet he is sorry she is here. His antipathy to the woman is as great as ever. He wonders whether Olivia, or any one present, knows

that there is some secret bond existing between the actress and this Mr. Westbrook, who barely acknowledge each other in public.

Mary is in a corner doing crochet, and wishing, poor child, that Rupert would come and talk to her, instead of joining Sir Warwick and Olivia, who certainly don't want him. Perhaps Rupert would do so, but that he remembers what Clara said about Mary, and his sister's hopes; and as it would be wrong to give the faintest colour to such —indeed, as he is rather indignant on the subject —he makes up his mind that he is to talk to Mary while he is here as little as possible, though he has, at heart, a kindly feeling towards the girl. Such fruit may a few words, adroitly dropped, produce! Instead of Rupert, a very dull, rich young man, whose name I have forgotten, and who has been asked here in the idea that Mary and he may fancy each other, has planted himself beside her. She wishes it were bedtime.

This is a faint sketch of that society, its grouping, its aspect, and the feelings of its several members towards each other, on that evening, from ten o'clock, when the men came in from the dining-room, until near eleven, when Mrs. Pomfret got up, and thought "we might have a little music, perhaps—eh, Julian? Where's your corney?"

"In its case," he replied.

"But you'll give us a little music, eh? You and Madame Stellino could do a duet, I dare say. Wouldn't that be nice, Lord Dumberly? The corney and the voice—so very soft. What's that thing I used to be so fond of—*Robert, Toy que j'aime*—ain't it?"

"Madame Stellino will sing it to you, alone; it isn't a duet. It is her *cheval de parade.* She has sung it to so many people, and always with effect."

She understood full well his covert meaning; it was not often he took the trouble of being sarcastic. She preferred this to his contemptuous carelessness. If she could but rouse him! rekindle, by jealousy, or otherwise, some spark of the old fire! She knew that there was rage at his heart just now, the rage of discomfited vanity, rage at the sight of a favoured rival, and of Olivia's happiness. His wrath must find a vent, but he thought no more of Clara at that moment than the gambler, who sees his fortune swept away, thinks of the spaniel whom he kicks aside. But might she not, now, by utterly ignoring him, by giving his vanity an object to strive for, in the reconquest over a possession to which two other men were laying siege—might she not, possibly, create a revulsion of feeling in him at this moment? Such things had been before now.

She rose, and went to the piano: he was standing near the end of it, and her elbow brushed his hand in passing. A thrill ran through her; she had not felt the touch of that hand for many a long day. Her voice shook when she began to sing: she could not forget herself in her song, as she generally did—never so little an actress, as when giving passionate utterance to fictitious joys and woes. She broke off suddenly; it was no use.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Pomfret, but I can't sing to-night. I don't know what is the matter—I am tired, I suppose. Please forgive me. I'll behave better another evening. I sang that song at the bishop's only last night—you can't think how dear and kind he was about it."

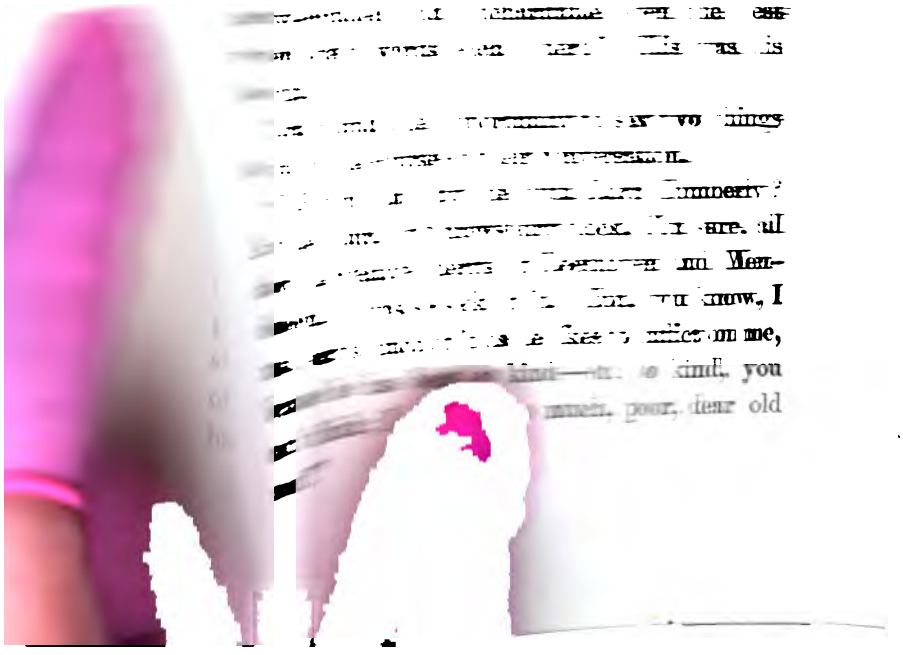
Lord Dumberly. Ah! of course—yes—he knows what's *what*. But, come now, pray don't leave off. It's too tantalising. 'Pon my soul, it's like an angel, the—the swell!—the compass!—positively, three octaves!—from the D below to the D flat above!

Westbrook turned away, muttering to himself.

"It requires *such* an angel, who is, assuredly, D. D. *below*, to compass such a flat as that—above her!"

Clara. Will not Miss Mary sing? Do please—that last little thing I taught you."

But Mary coldly declined.



The other thing she said was this:

"So I suppose it is all settled between dear Olivia and Sir Warwick? I'm so glad. No one has told me, but of course I have *eyes*. To think of our 'first floor' turning out to be a rich baronet. I can scarcely realise it. I never saw much of him. There were reasons. I think he was set against me. I don't expect he will ever get over the prejudice—and it is true I never liked *him*. Those things one can't help, you know. I am sorry, on account of dear Olivia. I always told her she would marry him, some day. She used to be indignant at the idea, because then he was nothing but a painter, I suppose. Dear Olivia always had a good deal of pride. You see she scarcely notices me, the poor singer, *now* that she is going to be a great lady. Who was right, and who was wrong, Mr. Marston? Didn't I tell you that my coming here would be very unwelcome to her? But, indeed, I don't know who it *is* welcome to. I think I had much better not have come. I have left such warm devoted friends in London! Did you see how rude that Mr. Westbrook was to me, to-night? And even that child, Mary Pomfret, was so ungracious in her manner."

"Oh, come! it's ridiculous, you're imagining that. How can you talk so?" But he remembered Warwick's chilling look and distant bow; he remembered Mary's avoidance of Clara—Mary,

who was Olivia's great friend—and he felt his anger stirred against his sister. "At least there are two people who you *know* are more than glad you are here. There's that old idiot of a lord, who wants to be very captivating, I suppose; you ought to be satisfied with *his* welcome——"

("Oh! he is nothing, poor dear old man!")

"And there is a much humbler person, to whom your coming simply makes all the difference in the world."

He added these last words in a lower tone, and with a passionate gaze, which satisfied Clara that she was not likely to suffer in the young man's eyes by any attempt that might be made to her prejudice.

Among the men in the smoking-room, that night, conversation was not very brisk. Little Stanridge had the talking mostly to himself; and the dull, rich young man, in a gorgeous attire, was his most attentive listener. Rupert smoked his cigar, not only in silence, but with his thoughts other where. Warwick Milton, rooted in the habits of many solitary years, was never very forthcoming among strangers; yet he had made an effort to draw Westbrook into conversation. It had met with no encouragement.

"D—— the fellow's impertinence!" he said to himself: "Does he think he is going to trot me out for his amusement? She has been telling him

about me, I suppose. Well, I gave her credit for being better than other women, but their vanity is all alike! That little devil, Clara! I see her game with those two men. How provokingly pretty she looked. I've half a mind—it would be good fun—to drive that fellow Marston mad, by cutting in, and spoiling his fun. If I stay here, I must do something to distract my thoughts!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WARWICK AND JULIAN.

Olivia lay awake that night for some hours, having relapsed into all her old uneasiness touching her brother. She had watched him and Clara during the last hour of that evening: she could not be mistaken: the case was even more serious than she had imagined. She accused herself of selfishness in having, in the midst of her own happiness, forgotten her brother's peril. She felt herself, in a measure, personally responsible in this affair. It was not as though he had sought out a woman touching whom all the world spoke ill, and of whose antecedents Olivia knew no more than all the world. She had been the original instrument by which Clara and her brother had be-

come acquainted; and she knew that concerning Clara which was ignored by every one.

And now he would marry her. She felt certain, from her knowledge of him, and from what she had observed that evening, that nothing but the bandage being rudely torn from his eyes would ever make him see this woman as she really was. He was in that condition when a man's passion blinds him to everything—makes him willing to give up everything for the attainment of his object. Now that Olivia was no longer dependent on him, he would marry Clara, beyond a doubt, unless his sister could devise some means of convincing him of the falsity and heartlessness of the little actress.

The night brought with it counsel. She had always shrunk, in past days, with true womanly delicacy, from discussing Clara with Warwick Milton. Matters were changed now. While guarding the woman's secret, which she had made up her mind nothing should ever induce her to divulge, she felt herself entitled to ask him, who was to be her sole support henceforward, to help in trying to save her brother.

They met Warwick at the parish church, and he walked back with them across the park. There was Clara, demure as a little child, with a very high-church prayer-book in one hand, while with

the other she gathered, every now and then, a bluebell as they crossed the rough park, among fern and heather; beside her walked Rupert. The other ladies and one or two men were in front: Olivia and Warwick fell behind. Now was her moment: the eyes of both were on the couple before them.

"Warwick, I want to talk to you about Rupert: I hope you like what you have seen of him?"

"Indeed I do. I am sure he is a straightforward, honourable fellow. He says little; but I don't like a man the less for that, at first."

"The fact is, he is not like himself just now. He is pre-occupied. You wouldn't find him silent generally. I am very unhappy about him. He has fallen desperately in love with Clara."

"So I guessed," replied Warwick, quietly, jerking forward, on the point of his stick, a bramble that lay in the way, till it fell some yards distant among the fern—"and I suppose you have come round to my views about her? She's like that briar—will stick to anything she gets near; only to be removed forcibly—and the further the better. I hope you were not the means of bringing her here?"

"No, I had nothing to do with it. As regards Rupert, the fact of my having named her so often in my letters drew him naturally towards her

when they first met, and her wonderful power of fascinating every one she comes near soon had its effect. I have said everything I possibly could to him; I might as well speak to the winds. I know that she is quite unworthy to be his wife, but—— tell me, Warwick, are there any circumstances, do you think, short of life and death, that can justify one's breaking one's solemn word, and betraying a secret that has been intrusted to one?"

He was silent for a minute.

"Is this your case, my darling?"

"Unhappily, it is."

He shook his head. "No, I hardly think so. All the sacredness of trust between man and man would be gone, if it was felt that circumstances in daily life might arise to justify betrayal. There *may* possibly be exceptions to this—but your case, at least, is not one. We must try and arrive at the truth in some other way, if, indeed, your brother's eyes are not opened in the course of time, as they most probably will be."

"Ah! no—they will not be opened—and 'the course of time,' Warwick, will be short, I fear, before he has pledged himself to her. Oh! If I could only believe that she was really an altered woman—that she really honestly cared for him, and would be to him a good faithful wife, I should be content to let her past sleep unknown. But,

unfortunately, I cannot think it. In spite of all her talk about religion, and her changed tone and manner, I see her trying to attract every man she comes near—and I am miserable about poor Rupert, who, unless she is flying at higher game, will certainly fall a prey to this heartless little coquette. Will you speak to him, Warwick? Will *you* tell him what you think of her?"

"I am afraid that would be worse than useless," said Warwick. "Without facts, my child, what weight is he likely to attach to my unsupported opinion?" After a pause, he added with some hesitation; "Tell me, were you aware that the man, Westbrook, who seems on the most distant terms now, was intimate with her formerly?"

Olivia coloured; she looked up into the fine manly face beside her; in her love and admiration for him, she felt ashamed of the avowal she was about to make. "Yes, I knew it.——Dear Warwick, this Mr. Westbrook is the person——of whom I spoke to you the other day."

He started, but said nothing. He knew too well how inexplicable what is called "a first love" often seems, after it has taken its place among the things of the past. But in his surprise at this revelation, he was silent for some moments. The subject originally connected with Westbrook, in his thoughts, gave place to another, of far closer interest.

The dark lashes glistened on Olivia's glowing cheeks, as she said presently:

"Do you despise me very much, Warwick? My pride is fallen, you see, since I confess this. You probably have seen enough of Mr. Westbrook, in a few hours, to form no very high opinion of him.—This is my own secret, therefore I have a right to tell it to you. I mean never again to have any secrets from you, Warwick.—If I could only tell you now what I have at my heart in this affair of Rupert's, I shouldn't be half so unhappy. It is the feeling that I am helpless that makes me miserable."

Then Warwick, while he stroked the fine slight hand that lay in his, knit his brow, and braced up all the loosened energy of his mind to meet this question; how it was possible to gain such knowledge as should save Rupert.

That afternoon Julian lay under the great cedar on the lawn, near the fish-pond; a cigar in his mouth, a novel before him. The cigar was bad, he threw it away; the novel was dull, he tossed it aside in disgust; then the gnats from the water began winding their intolerable little horns all round the back of his neck. He had been growing misanthropic for the last twenty-four hours; he was sick of life—of country-house life especially; Of what good was it for a man with a wretched thousand a year like himself, to try and do, or to

possess, anything? Had he been borna bsolutely poor, he might, with the abilities he had, have worked his way to distinction and fortune. As it was, he had been cursed with just sufficient to keep him from starving, to cripple all energy and ambition; while the prizes in the great lottery all fell to baronets with abbeys and untold wealth. Yes, he was sick of life; the Towers were gone to Spa; he had half a mind to follow them; only it would be uphill work now, as he neglected Lady Harriet all last season, and she looked very coldly at him the last time they met. He didn't know why he stayed on here; it maddened him to see Olivia smiling at her middle-aged lover; the cook, too, was by no means good; his uncle's dinners—did he not know them of old?—were pretentious in promise, cold and greasy in execution, indigestible in result. He was now suffering, partly, as he knew, from the effects of last night's food, washed down as it had been by the bitter waters of jealousy and wrath. Why should he go on enduring this—the society of a parcel of dull uninteresting people—now that the one object of his hopes was given to another? Would it not be better, and infinitely happier for him, to return to town by the next train? He acknowledged that it would; that is to say, he acknowledged it, when he felt most sentimental, and least venom-

ously sore at heart. At other times, he resolved to stand his ground—not to be driven away; and then the scheme of at once healing his wounded vanity and wreaking his spite against Rupert would recur to him. He would rather have liked a flirtation with Clara; she was prettier than ever, he owned; had they been strangers he would have rushed in, regardless of consequences. As it was, he could not be so regardless; if he gauged her principles correctly, he at least did equal justice to her astuteness. She was bent, he saw, on "rehabilitating" herself; on marriage; if not with one man, why then with another. Though he had very little doubt now, from certain symptoms, of how he would be received, if he showed any indication of a return to his former allegiance, he knew that it would not be on the old footing; and might not this clever little woman manage so to entangle him in the eyes of all present, as to render plausible retreat well nigh impossible? He felt it might be so; and yet, in his irritated objectless condition of mind, that Sunday, the temptation was strong.

Another shadow moved across the lawn, till it stood beside him. He looked up and saw Sir Warwick.

"What the deuce does he want?" thought Julian, but turned the other way again, and offered

no encouragement to conversation. He drew out his cigar-case and lit another cigar.

"Will you give me a light?" said Warwick, throwing himself on the grass beside Julian. "My pipe is gone out."

The younger man held out the fusee without a word. "You belong to the Norfolk Westbrooks, I think?" Warwick had puffed away a minute or two in silence, when he thus broke ground. "I used to know your father, when I was a young man."

"Did you," responded the other, without any accent of inqury in the voice. "That must have been some time ago."

"Yes," said Warwick, imperturbably, "more than twenty years. You were then, I suppose, at school. And yet I am sure I have met you before, somewhere. Your face is quite familiar to me."

"Indeed? There you have the advantage of me; I don't remember ever having seen you before."

"It can't have been in society: I have gone into none for many years. It may have been at the theatre—perhaps when this very little woman, Madame Stellino, has been singing? Did you know her at all when she was on the stage?"

"Slightly."

"She was a very different sort of woman in those days?"

"I should say *not*," returned Julian, with the same extraordinary coolness. "But—as you see—I know her so very little, that I can't presume to give an opinion."

"I applaud your discretion. However, *I* saw a good deal of the lady at that time——"

(Here Julian turned his head, just so much as should enable him to see Warwick's face: he began to feel stirred by some small emotion of curiosity. What if this model baronet of Olivia's should also turn out to have worshipped at Clara's altar formerly?)

——"and there is certainly a great change. She has become a far more finished actress. No one could have guessed now, by her manner last night, that you and she were—well—slightly acquainted formerly. I lived in the same house with her for some months, therefore I know a good deal about her."

"You lived in the same house?" repeated the other. He began to feel a little uncomfortable; but still more curious. Here was possibly the very opportunity he had long wanted of corroborating certain facts touching Clara. "Then you must be aware," he added, "that I was not

on visiting terms with Madame Stellino. I never was inside the doors."

"No: and yet, now I come to think of it, do you know, I am sure I have seen you with her."

"Not very likely; our meetings were few and purely accidental."

"I can certainly recal distinctly one at Exeter Hall. The expression of your face I remember perfectly. You must have been having some quarrel?—I thought so at the time."

"Really? Perhaps you're right. I don't remember. I used to be a good deal with actors and actresses, and they're all very impulsive."

"So you forget what you quarrelled about?"

"If you made as good use of your ears as you seem to have done of your eyes, no doubt you can tell me."

"No. Indeed, I should not have noticed you, but for the fact of being rather curious about Mrs. Elliston—as she then was. There were circumstances attaching to her which did not inspire me altogether with confidence."

"Ah! I suppose she had plenty of visitors, plenty of adorers, bringing their incense, in various forms, to offer up at the shrine of Venus? Possibly you, yourself, may have been among the number?"

"Not exactly."

"But you saw a good deal that led you to think

that the goddess was compassionate to her votaries? And the altar was daily besieged, I have no doubt?"

"As to what I may have seen or heard, Mr. Westbrook, I will imitate your discretion. You agree with me that it is far better not to talk about those things."

"You admit, however, by that very speech, that you *did* see a great deal you had better not talk about," persisted Julian, with a laugh: and the indifferent tone in which he spoke could not mask his interest in the subject to an observer like Warwick. "All those women are alike. Presents—admiration—flattery—there is not one of them who is not accessible through her vanity."

Warwick eyed him sharply.

"How comes it then, Mr. Westbrook, that, entertaining the opinion you do of this person, you should allow her to become a guest in your aunt's house, to associate on terms of intimacy with your cousins, when a word from you would have prevented it?"

Julian winced; but he replied quickly:

"I never interfere with my aunt's guests. And as to character, if one once began trying to purify society, heaven knows where one would stop. But it is evident you know more than *I* do about the

lady in question. I ask for information. To me she has always consistently acted the part of maligned virtue, injured innocence, and so on. I confess I have no great faith in these protestations. But your testimony would be worth infinitely more than my suspicions. We shall be duly grateful for it. I really feel rather curious on the subject. She's trying hard to hook old Dumberly, I see."

"She may land him," said Warwick. "I shall not spoil sport. A man of sixty-five can look out for himself."

Julian smiled sarcastically.

"And failing him, I suppose, Marston? He's very far gone, I see—and Miss Marston, I believe, is an intimate friend of madame's, so it will be a very nice little arrangement."

Warwick saw that this was meant to annoy him, but he replied quietly, that he "did not suppose, after baiting for salmon, that madame would be content with a minnow." Soon after this, he got up, and strolled away.

He had no further conversation with Julian then, or for some days after. If he had failed to acquire much positive information, he had, at least, gained an insight into the man's character; and he had discovered his anxiety to obtain proof, whereby a distinct accusation, touching that por-

tion of her life when Warwick had known her, might be fastened upon Clara. He pondered much on this; on the way in which Westbrook had spoken of her; of his affected indifference, ignorance, and unreadiness to breathe more than vague general suspicions of her as one "of a class;" while his eagerness to find these suspicions confirmed, by accusations from the lips of others, could not be concealed.

Warwick went to London early on Monday morning; ostensibly on legal business connected with his marriage. He was absent the greater part of that week; running down of an evening sometimes to see Olivia, and returning to town by the first train in the morning. I do not propose to trace out the circuitous paths, beset with difficulties, whereby he ultimately arrived at the object in view. Whether that mysterious Mr. Pollaky, whose advertisements stimulate the curiosity of the inquiring reader of the *Times*, was the agent through whom his efforts were crowned with success, I am not prepared to say. But all that week, Warwick, himself, was among managers, actors, scene-shifters, dirty men and women of all kinds; several times with Mrs. Flaherty, and through her, after many failures (she had heard the address, but could not remember it clearly), was brought to the humble

lodging in Pimlico, where Mrs. Boyce still lived. And thus, after a tearful story from the poor woman, it came to pass that, in the twilight of Saturday evening, Warwick Milton stood beside a little child's grave in Kensal Green.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST APPEAL.

"DUMBERLY," said Lady Caerlavrock (who was a plain-spoken woman, by times), one morning after breakfast, as she drew him aside, "you're making a fool of yourself with that little singer. She'll get I don't know what nonsense into her head, if you go on as you did last night. People quite remarked it—they did really."

"Gad, my dear," said the old lord, *se dindonnant* (for which I can think of no equivalent), "if people will talk they must talk. She's an uncommon nice little thing — with manners quite unlike the general run of young women now a days. She has the art of listening with interest to what one says, which so few possess. She's really dooced agreeable. If I took her in hand, I could

make her a scientific musician, which she isn't at present. But she seizes one's ideas — Jove! how she does seize 'em! I was, only last night, pointing out to her how the relative minor——"

"Oh, yes, Dumberly, I know all that, but for heaven's sake, don't think of 'taking her in hand,' as you call it. There is no saying what it might lead to. The woman's either exceedingly simple, in which case you may be leading her to form all sorts of ridiculous hopes, or she is very deep. Any way, it is really preposterous your going on like this. That young Marston, who is evidently desperate about her, and who would not be such a very unsuitable match as to station, I suppose, looked as if he could have killed you. Do pray think, Dumberly, of what you owe to your family and to society."

"If Madame Stellino finds my conversation agreeable——" began his lordship with pomp.

"Oh, stuff!" interrupted his sister. "As if any young woman could find it agreeable to hear you go on for the hour together about flats, and sharps, and dominants, and all that!"

"If nature never gifted you with an intellect to comprehend the science," returned Lord Dumberly, a good deal piqued, "that's no reason why you should deny it to others. It's dooced bad taste, my dear, to say the least of it. I was about

to remark, when you interrupted me, that as long as Madame Stellino finds my conversation agreeable, I shall not be deterred from talking to her, by any rubbish people may choose to say."

I doubt whether Lady Caerlavrock had not done more harm than good.

She had said truly: Rupert had occasional half hours of torturing jealousy. The position was one that needed all Clara's skill: she had a little difficulty sometimes in persuading him that gratitude for past kindness, and a due regard to her future professional interests, rendered it necessary for her to submit to Lord Dumberly's twaddle by the hour together. Then, at the word "professional interests," he started away with an impatient exclamation. Was it not the desire of his life, now, to take her away from all that? and he could not bring her actually to the point of a decisive 'Yes.' But things were approaching a crisis. Clara saw that they could not go on thus many days. She was a gambler throwing her last main. The highest number that the dice could turn up was to see Westbrook at her feet once more; the only man she had ever loved, and whom she now studiously shunned. Fortune had so far favoured her: his discomfiture about Olivia, leaving his self-love grievously wounded, and his daily occupation gone, rendered him in a fitting condition to take

refuge in the first substitute that offered itself; and the fact of her being an object of very open admiration to two other men in the same house was calculated to stimulate his vanity in the pursuit. She believed that if she could once again enchain him, even in weak bonds like these, she could gradually obtain such an ascendancy over him as would convert each thread of silk into an iron fetter. She had been but a child at the time of that foolish, miserable passage in their common history. She was now a woman; with all a woman's will, and subtlety, and knowledge of man's nature. Perhaps there was no character in sacred or profane history with which she had more sympathy than Delilah: not with her perfidy, be it understood, but with her power of rendering the strongest man prostrate before her. With this one man had she hitherto signally failed: he had, on the contrary, prostrated her. That he should no longer do so, that she should bring him under subjection, was the dearest wish of her heart. The next highest number that the dice could show, was the gratification of worldly ambition, and the triumph over all who had humiliated her, in the shape of a coronet and affluence—coupled, though it was, with a vain and tedious old man. The lowest number of all—for she was tolerably secure now from a blank—was Rupert, with his devotion and his very moderate means. She pitted these

three men, one against the other: in the feverish watches of those summer nights she lay scheming, and turning over in her mind the successes or the disappointments of the past day.

One afternoon, it was on the Wednesday or Thursday of that week, she had gone up to her own room an hour before dinner. A cup of tea, untasted, was on the dressing-table before her. She sat, her two elbows on her knees, and her chin resting in her hands, her eyes fixed upon the wall before her. She was in one of her wayward moods, half remorseful—reluctant to pursue to the end that course which she had so deliberately laid out for herself. In spite of all her outward success, there was bitterness at her heart: its first, though hidden desire remained unfulfilled. Julian never came near her: he watched her with curiosity, perhaps even with admiration, but it was at a distance: he appeared amused at seeing her with Lord Dumberly and Rupert. It seemed as if there was no spark of passion left that could be fanned into a flame again by opposition. Her hopes, miserable little woman—her hopes in this quarter were dwindling away hour by hour. And then, that next highest number for which she was striving and straining every nerve, why, when she sat down to think, as she now did, its possession, her possible success, made her sick by anticipation. There was that honest young nature, that devoted

man's heart, to fall back upon; and here it was that something akin to compunction smote her. There were moments when she shrank from deceiving him, even unto the altar, with a pretence of love. Perhaps, left to herself, the better angel who spoke at such moments might have triumphed just then; unfortunately, antagonism and jealousy arose and banded themselves on the other side.

There was a knock at the door, and Olivia entered.

The two young women had interchanged but few words in all those days. Clara saw that Olivia avoided her, and she resented it. Whenever Rupert was at Clara's side, a glance at his sister's troubled face gave a zest to the matter in hand, though Clara always studiously avoided seeming to encourage him. She suffered him—no more. If he chose to fall in love with her, how could she help it? This is what her manner with Olivia implied. She knew Olivia was her enemy—her deadly enemy, in this matter of the brother, and she was in her enemy's hand, yet such was her faith in Olivia's unwavering sense of honour that she had no fear of being betrayed.

She had said "Come in," and the door had opened. She started upon seeing who it was.

Dear Olivia! This is an unexpected plea-
This is quite like old days. I thought you

had given me up entirely, now that you are going to be a great lady. Don't take that hard chair, dear, you'll find this much more comfortable."

"Clara, I am come to talk to you seriously; will you listen to me? Never mind the chair; I am very well here. Above all, pray be simple and sincere with me, if you can. You know, as well as I do, that if I had given you up, it has nothing to do with my being 'a great lady,' as you call it. Our conversation can do no good, if we are not both of us to speak the truth, and it is quite unnecessary to act with *me*. You're much cleverer than I am, but I know you now. Will you be honest with me, for once?"

Clara tried to laugh.

"Well, then, to be honest, for once, suppose I say that it will entirely depend on honesty seeming to be the best policy? But I know, beforehand, all you are going to say. You're going to talk to me about that brother of yours. It's no use in the world, my dear, appealing to me. *I* can't help it."

"Do you mean to marry him, if he asks you?" Olivia put the question bluntly, but her voice shook.

"He *has* asked me."

"*He has asked you?* And what—what did you say?"

"That he must wait; that I couldn't make up my mind."

"Clara, for mercy's sake, refuse him. I implore—see, I beg of you on my knees! You don't love him. I *know* you don't, or I shouldn't—no, I swear to you—I shouldn't oppose his marrying you as I do. He is mad—he doesn't know what he is doing. My only hope now is in you. You know my lips are sealed—that I can tell him nothing of your dreadful past. Oh! if you have a spark of truth and honour left, at least tell him everything before you let him call you his wife. But better—far better than this, let your secret lie buried, and refuse him. What will it cost you? He has very little to give except his honest love, which to you would be absolutely worthless. You'll break his heart. Oh! spare him, Clara; don't do so wicked a thing as to let him marry you in his ignorance of what you are!"

"Why not?" asked Clara, with a heightened colour and an excited tone, which was rare with her. "If your brother is less worldly than you—we all know that *you* wouldn't marry in ignorance of what Mr. Thompson was—if he doesn't think about the disgrace of the connexion, or ask any question about my first marriage, why am I to tell him? Do you think there are not plenty of things in his past life he wouldn't exactly tell you and

me? Why is there to be that difference between a man and a woman? I don't see it. Is my whole life to be blasted because of my misfortune, and a man's cruel conduct to me? Pray, do you charitably shut me out, in consequence, from forming any future ties? And if I refuse your brother, am I, on the same grounds, to go on refusing every man who offers me the safety and comfort of a home?"

"Would there be safety or comfort in it? dreading the discovery, at any moment, of a secret which must ruin all domestic happiness? Think of what such a man as Rupert's love is! his entire faith, his generous refusal to believe anything, even the evidence of his own eyes, against the woman he loves. Will you betray such a nature as this, Clara? You'll find richer, more powerful men in the world—men whom you *may* love, perhaps—and to whom the blow would be less cruel. To him, the discovery of his wife's treachery and dishonour would embitter his whole life."

"Since we are to speak the truth," said Clara, her small eyes flashing, "let me say that I am perfectly aware you have done your *best* to open his eyes, short of perjuring yourself. You have left nothing unsaid that could prejudice me. When you dilated on the presents I received, it is a pity

that your candour, Olivia, didn't make you confess all that *you* received from Mr. Thompson; the clock he bought, pretending to have recovered it, the fruit, and game, and wine, the fictitious sale (oh, I heard all about it afterwards, when I called there, from Mrs. Flaherty) which produced such unheard-of results. You can act surprise and indignation, I see, my dear, as well as I could, and, to be sure, it doesn't much signify, now that he turns out to be a baronet and that you're going to marry him. It's all very fine for *you*, only it is rather hard that I should be visited with so much virtuous indignation for accepting an occasional cadeau, worth a few shillings, when you took hundreds of pounds' worth, without the smallest hesitation."

Clara had bided her time to strike this blow at her former friend. But for Olivia's engagement, it would indeed have been crushing. As it was, for a minute or two Olivia looked at her dumbfounded.

"God knows whether you are speaking the truth," she said at last; "but if this be so, Warwick will tell me. I can have no pride about it now, though a week since it would have wounded me more than words can tell. If it be as you say, he knows, and you know too, Clara, how utterly ignorant I was of it; and also that, however

plausible your defence is, there is little analogy between the two cases. However, we won't talk of your past; of this or any other act. It isn't by these I would judge you: but—I ask myself—if the change in you were real, is it possible you could go on as you are doing, both with the old man and with my brother? And supposing you cared for Rupert, would you not be the first to insist upon his knowing your whole history, before accepting him? Oh, Clara! my words are weak, I know, but I once stood beside you in an hour of bitter trial; you once called me 'your only friend.' In memory of that hour, which it's impossible that you do not think of sometimes, I implore you not to take this cruel advantage of the oath you extracted from me. If *you* will not speak, there are only two courses for me; either I must betray you, or submit to see my brother betrayed. I wish I could think that I was warranted in revealing your secret. I can't think so, unfortunately: the sin of concealing this, Clara, must rest with you. I have said all that I have to say."

Clara's face had gone very white during part of the above speech. She turned it away.

"I have never doubted you. There are some people one never *really* doubts in one's heart. I was bitter and unjust a moment ago: forgive me.

I am wretched just now, though I seem so different —and no human being guesses what is in my heart. There was a time when I might have talked to you, but all that is past. Of course, I know that we never can be again as we once were: but I'm not as ungrateful as you think. Now leave me—my head aches so, I must lie down, or I shall be such a fright at dinner. I can't say what I shall do; whether I shall have him or not. Don't talk any more of it now, Olivia. I can't make any promise. It must depend upon circumstances."

Olivia, heavy at heart, left the room. She knew the sandy soil upon which her words had fallen too well to hope much from it. Some little impression, perhaps, had been made, but the first wave of "circumstance"—meaning vanity, pique, or self-interest—would clean efface that impression. She had a greater fear than ever, now, in her heart, that this thing would be. She had done all she could: if it was to be stopped, it must be by other agency than hers. She knew nothing of Warwick's exertions in the matter, for he told her nothing, and she believed that he was powerless to help her. It was therefore she had appealed to-day to Clara; with what result we have seen.

An hour later all her fears were confirmed, when, on entering the drawing-room, she found

Madame Stellino seated on the sofa beside Rupert, who was helping her to tie up some carnations. She seemed more seductive than ever the whole evening. She sang like an angel, and Lord Dumberly was in the seventh heaven. She had on her arm, for the first time, a diamond bracelet. Of course, all the women observed it; and all made a pretty accurate guess whence it came. Lady Caerlavrock's indignation was undisguised: even Mrs. Pomfret murmured to Olivia that she doubted whether Madame Stellino was not a good deal *deeper* than she appeared. Nevertheless, it was to Rupert that she very decidedly directed all her glances—perhaps with the object of driving the old nobleman to desperation—and it was for Rupert that she made room on the ottoman, after his lordship had been standing, shakily, over her for a quarter of an hour. Julian was in an armchair with the new *Quarterly*, in which he made a show of being absorbed. I think he was watching her, over the top of the book, with mingled admiration, disgust, and curiosity. "Clever little Jezebel!" said his thoughts. "How she twists them both round her finger. She is really thrown away here. Just the woman to serve a political party. What are the odds she catches the old man? Well, at last, Clara Elliston, you are showing yourself to me now in your true light, without

any humbug. I like you better so. If you would always have shown yourself thus——Upon my life, if it wasn't for the consequences, I should feel inclined to go in again, even now, and spoil the sport here. But it wouldn't do. Once out of the fire (and not without burnt fingers), I should be a fool to tumble into it again."

Clara knew that he had never turned a leaf of that *Quarterly* he held in his hand. With exultation had she twice detected his eyes fastened upon her. Was there even yet, then, a hope left?

"You must be pleased to see your great friend and your brother getting on so well," Julian took an opportunity of saying, with a sneer, to Olivia that evening.

"She fascinates every one," was her reply.

There was a pic-nic in the woods next day. In a narrow path, for two minutes, Clara and Westbrook were close to each other, and alone.

"You aim at high game," he said, "and I shouldn't much wonder if you brought him down. I admire your skill. Who'd have thought of this four years ago, eh?"

"Who, indeed!" she rejoined bitterly.

"Doesn't this sort of thing bore you? I suspect you like the old Bohemian life better? Confess."

"There were things in the old life I liked better,"

she said, with passionate meaning, as she looked up into his face.

"All this cant about charity, this talk about bishops and curates—it's very dull. Even the cold after-dinner applause you get—don't you long to exchange it for the excitement of the stage, the rapture of the pit and gallery?"

"I would exchange it for the belief I had, then, in man's honour and truth—a belief which will never return to me."

"No doubt," he laughed. "You have tried too many to have much stability of faith in men."

"Mr. Westbrook!" called Lady Caerlavrock, "with your long arms and your stick, can you reach us those water-lilies?"

After an ineffectual attempt he waded in, up to his knees. At such moments, when the dandy gave place to the athletic man, whose movements were all graceful, Julian looked to particular advantage.

"Quite like a river-god, isn't he?" cried Mrs. Pomfret.

Clara thought so; and began fastening her shoe —her pretty little shoe—up, on the bank. She wondered whether he would give one of those lilies to her; and perhaps the thought was carried to him, by some electric fluid. After gathering an arm full of lilies, as he waded back to the bank, he stooped to pick a forget-me-not.

"Pretty little blue thing, isn't it?" he said, as he passed her, and dropped the flower into her lap. Among the other ladies he divided the lilies. Some of them wore the flowers in their hair that evening; some of them threw away "those nasty oozy things" before they reached home. One person, only, treasured the little water weed that had been given her, wondering whether it might have any significance.

Two mornings after this, on the same Saturday that Warwick Milton brought his investigation to a successful issue, a slight accident interfered with one of Clara's schemes. Lord Dumberly, while dressing, had a paralytic seizure. But for this, the probabilities are, I think, that there would be a Viscountess Dumberly at this moment; instead of which, the title, as we know, became extinct, on the death of the late lord, a few months since. He never saw Clara again after that Friday night, when he squeezed her hand as he gave her a candlestick, and affectionately wished her "pleasant dreams." He lingered, with impaired powers of utterance, more than three years, but his nerves could never again stand the sound of music, and his careful relations kept all seductive singers out of his way.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS PRINGLE UNBOSOMS HERSELF.

THERE was to be a large dinner-party that evening at the Abbey: and as some of the bidden guests were to come long distances, it would have been very difficult to put them all off. After the country doctor had pronounced Lord Dumberly to be in no immediate danger, Lady Caerlavrock had begged that her brother's illness might not interfere with the projected entertainment. Two physicians arrived from London in the course of the day; and telegrams were sent all over the country to sundry nephews and others, interested in his lordship's state of health. After that, Lady Caerlavrock, not being a woman who gave way to foolish anxieties, but rather feeling herself an-

hungered by the confinement in a close room, went and dressed herself for dinner.

Among the guests were Mr. Tharpe and Algy, who came from London to the barrister's cottage for his Sunday's holiday; and had been invited at Olivia's special request. And—*not* at Olivia's request, but because of Mrs. Pomfret's kindly nature, cropping out through all her absurdities—Miss Pringle had been invited to spend a week at the Abbey, and was also to arrive to-day.

"I think it would please the old soul, my dear, to come and offer her congratulations to you," was Mrs. Pomfret's plea to Olivia; "and though her conduct was really quite unjustifiable about Sir Warwick, and though I know she made your life a burthen to you, still, in her way, she's fond of you, and she's old and all alone. Then she talks, which is always a *great* thing in a party, and she plays whist; and though I couldn't have her in London, you understand, when one really hasn't *room* for old women, it is different here. I think Lady Caerlavrock would be quite amused with her, so I mean to make my peace with your aunt, my dear (though I know she is furious with me), and invite her down here on Saturday."

Miss Pringle, like a wise woman, pocketed her past affronts and accepted. She arrived, with a splendid new supply of caps for the occasion, and

wept a few tears as she folded her niece in her little withered arms, ejaculating:

"My dear, dear child! This is, indeed, gratifying! To think that all my exertions for you should have been so crowned! I hardly know how to believe it. Such a *fine* man, my dear, quite irrespective of the fortune and the title, and all. I ever thought there was something about him unlike the common herd. And then the nobility of his sentiments in not wishing you to know his rank—so touching—so very touching! I'm sure I've said to myself, fifty times, 'That man can never be a common painter.' Ah! how right you did to refuse that young Tharpe—every way an inferior match. Poor young man! You should have seen the Quintus Smiths' astonishment when I told them the match you were going to make. But, indeed, as I said to her, the Pringles, being descended from Robert the Bruce's henchman, are quite entitled to intermarry with the highest in the land. I knew, all along, that it only required for you to *mix*——"

"In order to settle," laughed Olivia; but the next moment she sighed, for her thoughts reverted to Rupert.

Poor Algy Tharpe was naturally a little flustered when he first appeared. He bolted up to Olivia, stumbling over a footstool on his way, and ignoring

the entire Pomfret family in his nervous excitement, until the fact was gently recalled to him by Olivia. Then, blushing scarlet, he made a plunge at his host and hostess, and returned to Olivia's sofa, pouring out, in a continuous stream, whatsoever words would let themselves be delivered from his mouth.

"I'm awfully glad, Miss Marston. I am, indeed. He's such a splendid dear old fellow. I always told you he was, before I thought that you thought—I mean before I knew that you knew—you know what I mean. Well, since then, I've been with him for months, and I know him, and love him, ever so much better; and I wanted to see you, and to tell you that—that I'm not such a fool as I was, Miss Marston, and that I am tremendously glad you're going to marry such a trump as Sir Warwick—and—and——"

Olivia here came to his aid.

"I was very glad when I found you were abroad with him. I knew you couldn't be in better hands. And he has spoken of you to me with so much affection and gratitude. He says that, but for your watching, he would not be alive now. And he tells me, too, what made me so very happy to hear, that you have come back determined to work hard, and in good heart about it."

"Well, I think—I hope I have. The governor's been awfully kind—seems to think I really may do something. A fellow can but try, you know; so I'm going to begin grinding on Monday."

After dinner, Miss Pringle watched her opportunity and fastened upon the young man. She felt herself, like the ancient mariner, compelled to disgorge her sentiments into the ear of every "wedding-guest," no matter how inappropriate, or how distasteful the narrative might be to the listener.

"My dear Mr. Algernon, this is indeed a coincidence, is it not? our meeting on *such* an occasion as this, eh? I feel for you—I do, indeed. But it must be a consolation to you, I think, that she is going to marry a baronet. Had it been a plain mister, the blow would naturally have been much greater. I *always* told your dear aunt, Mrs. Quintus, that my Olivia was made to grace a lofty sphere. Still, being of a romantic turn myself, I can feel for you, my dear Mr. Algernon, from the bottom——"

"Thank you, Miss Pringle. You're very good. Don't talk about it, please. Of course I was an ass ever to think she could care for such a fellow as me. And she's going to have the best and noblest husband any woman ever had, and——"

"This is truly magnanimous—quite touching, my dear Mr. Algernon! for, it's no use denying it, I know *all* you must feel at this meeting. Ah! it reminds me of a man at Bath who saw me once, in the Assembly Rooms, after *some years* had passed. He was so affected, poor man, that he left the room *instantly*, without *trusting* himself to come up and speak to me. I assure you I *felt* it more than if he had come up and said ever so much. Ah! Mr. Westbrook, I've not said 'How d'ye do?' to you yet" (here Algy Tharpe made a bolt for it), "and we've not met for a long time. How does the trumpet go on? Still play, eh? I see your name sometimes in the *Morning Post*, at parties—always *look* for it."

"It isn't often there," said Julian, with a superfine air, as he stroked his silky moustache. "I have almost given up going to people who let in reporters. It's what all the outsiders do, and it's decidedly snobbish."

His aunt, who was hard by, had paid largely to have a reception of fine folk duly chronicled, a fortnight before: and as to the marriage, though that was no affair of hers, *she* best knew (Julian only suspected) who it was that had supplied all those interesting details about the bridesmaids' dresses, and the presents, which had filled half a column of the *Morning Post*. The poor lady got very red, and walked away.

"Charming marriage of my dear niece's—isn't it, Mr. Westbrook? Everything one could desire, and I'm sure you'll agree with me that she's fitted to grace *any* sphere? Ah! I remember, at the Cedars, how you used to blow away at sentimental tunes—you were an admirer of hers in those days, eh? Well, every one can't be equally blessed, you know; as I often remarked to poor dear General Tufts, at Harrowgate, when he sighed over his large family, and alluded *pointedly* to single blessedness—for we had known each other in *other* days. 'No!' I said, 'had you touched my heart, general, when you were a penniless ensign, you might not now have the misfortune of this *large family*.' 'Indeed, I should think *not!*' he replied, very feelingly. Poor man! he was carried off by the waters last year, leaving a widow with nine sons and daughters."

"The blessing of being a baronet, with twenty thousand a year," sneered Julian, "is like mercy. It blesseth the man who gives and the woman who takes; and it counterbalances, in the eyes of a sensible woman, any number of drawbacks, such as age, eccentricity, and the fact of succeeding to a first wife, who was the drunken daughter of a low apothecary. No, Miss Pringle, we are not all equally blessed: you're quite right."

Aunt Clo would probably have been equal to the occasion, and have turned off, playfully, a very

rude unpleasant speech, but that she espied Mr. Tharpe within hailing distance. Temptation and a graceful escape presented themselves alike under the form of the grisly large-nosed barrister. It was handling edge tools; but that, poor old lady, she forgot, in her exultation, and the necessity under which she laboured of pouring herself out on the one subject which kept bubbling up, like a perennial fountain, in her mind.

"Mr. Tharpe! Mr. Tharpe! Pray come and say 'How d'ye do?' You've not forgotten me, I *hope?*"

"There are things which, when once seen, ma'am, can never be forgotten,' said the lawyer. Then he sat down in a chair in front of her, for the better examination of this natural curiosity, while he drew out of that particular drawer of his memory, marked 'Pringle—old idiot—girl's aunt —interview, February 23rd,' all the facts regarding this fossil, which he had put away for the last six months.

"How very pretty of you, Mr. Tharpe! Now, really, I call that——! It reminds me,—but you'll think me vain if I tell you, eh? besides I know you're dying to congratulate me on this auspicious event, now, ain't you? I went to see your dear sister yesterday, to tell her of the delightful news; for it *is* delightful now, isn't it? Everything one

could desire, and so fitted as my Olivia is to grace any sphere! We *had*, you remember, *other* views for her *once*, eh? but I've got to think that wouldn't have *done*."

"Done what, ma'am? As the girl isn't a fool —I don't know much about gracing spheres—but as she seems to have common sense, she refused my cub of a boy, and has done him some good, for which she has my thanks. I suppose, ma'am, you've chosen your permanent bedroom at the old Manor House? I remember that living with your niece entered into your 'views.'"

"My dear sir, pray be careful! Don't speak so loud. I wouldn't for the world—you understand, eh? there is a delicacy in these matters. I hope, in the course of *time*, that the affection between Sir Warwick and myself, of which I may truly say I have long felt the seeds germinating, may ripen. You have known him, I believe, many years?"

"Yes; and I never thought he would have been fool enough to have married again. One trial of that work, ma'am, is enough in a lifetime."

"Mr. Tharpe!——Really——"

"You were wise, ma'am, in your generation (the *last*," he muttered). No doubt you had great difficulty in avoiding that state of bondage, but you did avoid it. You were wise, ma'am."

"Well, Mr. Tharpe, what you say has—certainly—great *truth* in it; still that view of matrimony is hardly, eh?—altogether quite orthodox—seems almost profane, I'm afraid. And as to my niece——"

"Oh, I've nothing to say against the young woman; only, you see, the whole institution, my good lady, is a mistake—a horrid mistake. Now, if they made a temporary arrangement——"

"Mr. Tharpe! can I believe my ears? I'm shocked. This is really bordering upon grossness! Olivia, my love, do come and talk to this naughty, *naughty* man, who is saying such things, he quite, quite frightens me!"

She hopped off, leaving Olivia and Mr. Tharpe standing together. He had scarcely ever spoken to the girl before; he had watched, and had listened to her, carefully and silently, on the two or three occasions when they had met; and she had very studiously avoided him. But now these two people wanted simultaneously to say a few words to each other.

"Miss Marston, I really believe you've stirred up that lout of mine into a desire to work—into feeling a just contempt for his own idleness and ignorance. If so—if it doesn't all end in smoke—you'll have done him the greatest service any one human being can confer upon another."

"Will you, in return, confer one on me?" She was not afraid of him now: however uncouth and sarcastic he might be, her altered position towards Algernon's father now enabled her to speak without hesitation. "I do not think you have ever done your son justice, Mr. Tharpe. Of course I am not foolish enough to suppose that any words of mine could alter your opinion, or your conduct, but Sir Warwick says——"

"Ah, Sir Warwick is an enthusiast, Miss Marston—'carried away by his feelings,' as people call it. A man has no business with feelings. They play the deuce with his judgment."

"I'd rather have the impaired judgment, then, since the two are incompatible, according to you. I was going to tell you that Sir Warwick found him a most pleasant travelling companion; interested in everything they saw. He says he never knew any one with a truer appreciation of Nature —more keenly alive to all that is beautiful and grand."

"As to that, Miss Marston, any old woman can rave about light and shade, and moonlight and mountains, and so on. But I talked to him the other night about Italy for a few minutes; and it really did seem to me that he had picked up an idea or two, about the condition of the people, and

the political state of the country,—which was more than I expected."

"Some people expect too much. I think you expect too little of your son, Mr. Tharpe. If you appeared to think it possible that he *could* do anything, you would double his chances of success. Perhaps he has never spoken of himself as much to you as he has to me. Women, I suppose, have the power of drawing more out of such natures than most men, most fathers, have."

"Probably. I believe you're right. Well, he has got an opening, and I'm ready to believe he wants to work. But you know the adage about 'new brooms.' If this one don't go to pieces at the end of three months, I shall have more faith in the lasting effects of a woman's influence than I ever had before. Where is Sir Warwick?"

"In London, on business; but I hope he will be down to-morrow."

* * * * *

Clara had been singing, and was still at the piano. Mrs. Pomfret asked her to accompany "my nephew, who has kindly consented to play that sweet thing from the *Trovatore*." As he bent over the music-stand, ostensibly pointing out how certain passages were to be taken, he murmured, "I feel for your disappointment. Only a bracelet instead of a coronet! You did all a woman could

do—but it's no good; the game's up now. And as to that Marston, let me recommend you, as a friend, not to throw yourself away on a fellow in that position, where your talents can't have fair play. You can do better for yourself than that."

"Thank you for the advice. Mr. Marston is at all events a man I can trust, and who, I believe, is sincerely attached to me."

"He is a muff, and a prig. As to his moral qualities——"

"You don't think I'm capable of appreciating them? Perhaps not: but I can, at least, appreciate faithfulness."

"It's a great mistake to expect that. I should have thought you were too clever. Have you found it in any one of the many men with whom you've been singing this very '*Non ti scordar di me*' since we used to sing it together?"

She played a chord. "Mr. Westbrook, are you ready to begin?"

When he had done, she got up without a word, and walked away. His hand (this time she fancied it was not quite accident) was dropped close to her's as she rose. Once again the touch thrilled her in a way that nothing else ever did.

* * * * *

Warwick Milton and Rupert stood on the terrace together. It was Sunday night; and the

associate with mine. I shall grieve very much if this be so; but I take the scriptural view of a man's choosing his wife, that he must give up father and mother, and all, and cleave to her alone, who is to be one flesh with him. As to other people, what they think or say weighs with me very little. I value the world's opinion at what it is worth.' Thus, you see, he has come to his decision, as he himself said, not in the sudden heat of passion, but after a night of calm reflection. He got her to confess everything to him this morning; as far as I can gather, she made a very clean breast of it, and, in his infatuation, he is resolved to marry her. I have only one thing left to do now; to get Westbrook out of the house as quickly as possible. When I point out the state of the case, of course he will see the necessity of going at once. Your brother almost foams at the mouth when he speaks of him. Of course he sees, for the sake of madame's reputation, if for nothing else, how extremely foolish it would be to have a violent scene with the fellow; but his exasperation is so great that I couldn't answer for the consequences, if they remained in the same house."

"Pray go at once then, Warwick. I know Rupert, so well; I dread their meeting. The air, I think, will feel lighter when that man is out of the house."

lino very much; that, in short, you mean to marry her."

He paused. Rupert did not hesitate a moment to reply.

"You are right. Well, and what then? Of course I know—I can see—that Olivia has prejudiced you against her. Has she asked you to speak to me on the subject? If so, Milton, let me tell you, it's no use in the world. My mind's made up. I can only hope that time will make my sister less absurd—less cruel and unjust than she now is. Because a woman——"

"Now, my dear fellow, will you listen to me, calmly, for a few minutes? What I have to say will, I know, be painful, but you must hear me to the end. Olivia is neither cruel nor unjust. Her opinion of Madame Stellino is founded on what she *knows*, and this she has never divulged to any one. I have only just learnt it myself. You are deceived in this woman. I can prove to you that she is unfit to be your wife."

"Prove it," he exclaimed, vehemently.

"She was unfaithful to her husband. She had a child by another man—a man you know—a man who is in this house now."

Rupert dashed his cigar to the ground.

"By G—! if this is true. Who is it?"

"Westbrook. —— Of course, like every fellow

He replied that he didn't mind the rain. He meant to walk. His servant would follow, with his things, by a later train. Clara slipped from the room unobserved. She was in a fever. Her little fingers trembled as she stood in the hall, and listened, and then hurriedly fastened a cloak around her, took an umbrella from the stand, and passed out swiftly by a side door into the shrubbery. There was a path she knew of, which intersected, at no great distance from the house, the direct road to the station. Why was she going to waylay him? What did she hope for? What could she possibly expect from him? She could scarcely tell herself; she only knew that she must, *must* see him once again, and alone. She had triumphed over her enemies now; she had succeeded, in spite of them all, in securing to herself a home and a respectable name and position. She was going to be the wife of another man—a man for whom she cared nothing; she had resolved to sacrifice herself; and she must see Julian once—only once more—she must make one last appeal to him before she took that irrevocable step. It was as a frenzy that possessed her: she knew, in her equivocal position, the danger of what she was doing, and she dared it. She rushed along, under the dripping branches, until she came to a place where the path touched the border of the lake, and

"Marston," said the other, at last, "thank God this knowledge comes yet in time to you. I suffered once, as you are doing, but with this difference—I learnt the worthlessness of the woman I loved *after* she had become my wife. Thank God! you have taken no irrevocable step. The blow must be heavy enough, whenever it falls, that shatters all our love and hope and trust, but at least you are spared a life-long misery by having your eyes opened before it was too late."

Still Rupert neither moved nor spoke. A bat flapped by them, and the soft summer night wind sighed among the leaves, but there was no other sound for nearly a quarter of an hour. At last, the younger man rose.

"Good night," he said. "I can't talk about this now. I feel stunned—my thoughts all crushed, somehow. I suppose, in a few hours, I shall begin to see things more clearly. The night brings counsel they say. Good night." He turned abruptly towards the house. The low, broken voice told Warwick better than any words that Rupert could have uttered, how poignant was the young man's suffering.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY.

THE post-bag the following morning contained one letter for Madame Stellino. She opened it at the breakfast-table, cast her eye carelessly over its contents, and slipped it into her apron pocket with an air that bespoke plainly the slender interest aroused by the communication. Not thus did she read a note just afterwards which a servant placed in her hands. Rupert had not appeared at breakfast. She recognised his handwriting before she read the words:

"Will you be in the Vineyard in half an hour's time? I have something of importance to say to you."

She raised her eyes, they met Westbrook's on the opposite side of the table, and the shadow of a

satirical smile touched the corners of his mouth. She coloured with anger, and crushed the note in her hand. Did he guess what conflicting thoughts were wrestling in her mind? Why should she throw away the tangible advantages of a good "position" for the sake of a chimera connected with this man, who showed so clearly that he despised her; whose contemptuous trifling, whose cold, scornful scrutiny taught her every day how hopeless was the chance of ever regaining her ascendency over him; yet this was the question which had kept her awake half the night, for she knew that the hour was at hand in which she must pronounce her own fate. Last evening it had been different; the determination to worst her enemies, to succeed, in spite of all opposition, had enabled her to enact the part she had found it convenient to assume.

After all, he was a well-looking, clever fellow, likely to prosper in the world, entirely devoted to her, and sure to gratify every whim and fancy of his wife's. Many a woman would think herself blessed with less than this. And for her, with a stormy past, which, though irrecoverably buried, as she believed, caused her a certain disquietude at times when she reflected that after all it *was* possible that Olivia, at the eleventh hour, might betray her; for her, I say, was not the prospect

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RIVEN CHAIN.

She opened her eyes, and closed them again, with a shudder; then she tried to raise her head, which still rested on his shoulder.

"Leave me," she said, feebly. "I can get home. I had rather be alone."

He made no reply, but kept fanning her with his hat. Even now he would not suspect her, though a dark shadow had fallen suddenly upon him, and his heart was sore oppressed. He tried to drive away the suggestions that would arise; he repeated to himself that she would explain all; he shut his eyes resolutely, for the moment, to all save the work of restoring her to consciousness; but I will not say that he did not suffer keenly all the time.

Presently she sat up, and with her own hands

put back the hair from her face. The rain was coming down faster than ever; it poured off the eaves of the little summer house where they sat. She stared out blindly into the rain, not seeing it, or anything but the images which her own shattered slow-returning thoughts brought with them. She raised her hand to her neck, and feeling the miniature hanging out, she thrust it quickly back into her dress. Then she turned her face away from him, and buried it in both her hands awhile. Of course he had discovered everything. There was no longer anything to be gained by concealment; even if she had not felt too miserable to try, just then.

"Why do you not leave me?" she moaned, without uncovering her face.

"Because you are not in a fit state to be left. Try and calm yourself. I won't talk to you."

"Of what use is that? You know all. I fear your reproaches all the same."

"I know nothing, Clara."

"Let me speak, then—let me speak to you now, lest I should be tempted afterwards to remain silent—to deceive you again. I did wrong in accepting your hand, Mr. Marston. You are free. I loved another man. In spite of everything, I *love him still.* He has just treated me with greater indignity, greater cruelty than ever—and

yet, God help me! I can't hate and despise him as I ought. There: now you know the truth. I'm not fit to be your wife. And now go, please. You can say nothing that I don't know. My conduct has been very bad towards you. I am a wretched woman, struggling for a name and a decent position. That's all I can say in my defence."

Rupert's face went deadly white as she spoke. He set his teeth hard; but he said nothing for some minutes after she had ceased. At last he murmured in a hoarse voice:

"God forgive you for having deceived me, Clara! And yet—and yet I am willing, even now, to believe that it is as the father of your dead child that you have clung, and still cling to the thought of this scoundrel—that you have looked on him as your husband, in Heaven's sight; and that in this light you have shrunk from forgetting him—from putting him away completely—as he deserves. You deceive yourself when you say that you still *love* him: it isn't possible. I say no more. You are excited now. In the course of time you may feel differently. Can you stand?—take my arm. We will walk slowly home."

She did as she was told, like a child. She said nothing, but with a pale impassive face, rose, and leant upon his arm, and walked, in silence, back

to the Abbey. As they entered the door, she managed to get his hand in hers, and pressed it gently.

"God bless you. You are a good man," she whispered; "you deserve a better fate. Oh, how different my life might have been had I only known you four years ago! Good night. I shall not come down to dinner." She gave him one look back, which he remembered long afterwards, and glided up the great oak stairs, with her dripping dress, and long gold hair hanging about her shoulders, like the wraith of some drowned woman revisiting her home. Rupert gazed after her till she was out of sight. Then he turned away, with a great sigh that came from the very bottom of the poor fellow's heart.

He felt miserable and hopeless. He shrank from meeting Warwick or Olivia, as though he must betray himself; for how could he appear unchanged?—he, to whom all acting, all dissimulation was foreign—while his heart was a prey to the bitter thoughts which forced themselves upon him. No man who was not absolutely mad could doubt that she had spoken the truth; and yet his passion blinded him almost to this point. He caught, as a drowning man catches at a straw, to the possibility of her unsaying to-morrow what she had confessed to-day. She was excitable—

impulsive — her feelings towards Westbrook, fraught with remorse and self-reproach, were variable and confused. She was liable, under the influence of emotion, to deceive herself—she did not know her own heart. It was thus he sought, with all the special pleading of passion, to argue the point against that clear-sighted advocate, his common sense.

Far into the twilight, gathering round the Abbey in thick mists, through the fine silent rain, she sat in her small upper chamber, motionless, alone; her head bowed forward in her hands, her elbows resting on the table; the long hair, the wet gown, still clinging about her. Her little maid came in, with a white dress upon her arm: Clara, without raising her head, sent her away. Upon the table lay an open letter — the one she had received that morning — she had now re-read it, weighing its contents more deliberately than she had before done. How should she answer it? Upon this her future fate would turn.

She knew well how great her influence still was over Rupert, and the exercise of this power was not without attractions for her. She had but to go to him, and say, "Forget the folly I uttered just now. If the interview with my poor child's father disturbed my reason for awhile, if in recall-

ing memories of the past, some of the old tenderness awoke in me again for a moment, and I mistook a passing emotion for a permanent sentiment, can you not forgive me? I have been sinful: I am still a weak, wayward creature. Take me, with all my imperfections on my head, if you will. I am yours." She had but to say this, and he would joyfully open his arms to her; that she well knew. The very foolishness of the man's faith touched her. Had he been more difficult to deceive, to cajole, and to recapture, her indomitable love of conquest would, perhaps, have risen once more within her. As it was, when she turned from self-contemplation, from weighing the possible future of gratified ambition, solitary and friendless, which was opened to her, with the devotion of a true-hearted man, and the solid comforts of a peaceful home; from thoughts of her own passionate disappointments and frustrated hopes, to the thought of this faithful lover, who, undeterred by the knowledge of her past life, nay, even now, undaunted by her avowal, was ready to take her to himself, her heart was softened. In that hour, Olivia's words—the sister's pleading for her brother—came back to Clara, I believe, with redoubled force. She had put them away from her, as she had the power of doing most things that were painful to her, at most times. She had

tried not to see Olivia's eyes the night before, and again that morning; she had said to herself that it was a duel between them, in which every weapon had fallen into Olivia's hand, and Clara's own superior skill and strategy had disarmed her adversary. Now her heart, in its abandonment, spoke a language nearer to the truth. Such moments are there in the lives of all. They are generally transient, for conscience, when habitually hoodwinked, cannot be expected to stand the hard searching light of day for very long at a time. I think it probable that Clara felt this; that she knew herself well enough not to trust to her own spasmodic strength for standing upright against the next incoming tide of vanity, and selfish care, and wordly consideration. There was the letter open before her. Let her answer it, and by doing so, decide her fate now, beyond recall.

The post went out at seven. A few minutes before that hour she hurriedly scrawled a line or two, rang for her maid, and gave her letter for the bag. Having once taken her resolution, she no longer hesitated, nor turned back. Between eleven and twelve o'clock that night she had an interview with Mrs. Pomfret, and one with Olivia.

The servant who brought in Rupert's hot water for shaving the next morning, brought him, with it, a letter.

"Madame St'lino desired this to be given to you, sir. She's just hoff."

"Off! Where? What do you mean?"

"By the eight hup train, sir."

He asked no more questions, but tore open the letter.

"Dear Mr. Marston,—dear, very dear to me as a faithful friend,—this is to wish you good-bye, perhaps for ever; certainly for years. I write this late at night: early to-morrow I leave Milton Abbey, because I particularly wish *not* to see you again. I do not deserve your forgiveness. I cannot bear your reproaches, even if their only language should be your eyes. Yes; I have come to the determination to accept a life of further toil and solitude, rather than drag you down by linking my lot with yours, when I have nothing to give in return for such devotion. Ah! do not be too hard on me in your heart, if I have tried to believe myself—tried to make you believe, that I loved you enough to marry you. I am one of those women born to inspire more passions than they can return—and so I suppose it will be to the end. I gave my heart away once; now I think in its place there is a stone. And yet, at this moment, I feel only too keenly all your goodness, all your forbearance towards me, and how I have

repaid it. But it is not too late for the mischief to be repaired. You are young: you will very soon forget one who has only crossed your path to cast her dark shadow there. You deserve a better wife than I could ever have been; may you soon find her.

"I have accepted an engagement to go to Australia, to sing there in operas; afterwards, on to Calcutta and Madras, I believe—perhaps all round the world. I have no ties in England now —nothing to make me regret leaving it, or to make me desire to return: everything is dead to me here! But in the excitement of a successful career I can still delight, and perhaps drown some vain regrets. At all events I, who know myself, believe that I can be happier in leading such a life than I could be at the domestic fireside of any man — now. There was a time when it might have been otherwise; but it is useless to refer to that.

"I have seen Olivia. I have bidden her good-bye. I have received her forgiveness. I have only now to ask for yours, in your *heart*, not with your lips; for I must beg you, as a favour, not to try and see me, during the short interval that will elapse before I leave England. If I ever return— a poor battered middle-aged creature, and find you the happy father of a family, you will thank me

for what I am now doing; and this, which now wounds you, will then, alas! be my only claim to your regard. That you may be happy and prosperous is the sincere wish of

"Yours ever most gratefully,

"CLARA STELLINO."

CHAPTER XVIII.

POSTSCRIPT.

I HAVE little more to add. The events herein recorded took place so recently, that, in the literal sense of the word, the *lives* of the chief actors in this story are probably not yet half run out. Yet, in another sense, they have lived their lives. The crisis, the turning-point in each, is past. Years, which will bring to them their share of joys and sorrows, can show them nothing above or beyond the top of the hill which they have reached.

Olivia has reigned long enough at the old Manor to have three noble boys. Mr. Pomfret still lives at the Abbey, for, of his seven years' lease, two have yet to run; but after that, Warwick Milton has promised his wife that he will reoccupy the

home of his ancestors. Indeed his antipathy to the place, his dread of its old miserable associations, has worn away under the influence of a happy peaceful home. He can bear now to stand in the grim library, looking out of its mullioned windows on to the fish pond, without living over again the wretched scenes which embittered his life for nearly twenty years. He and Olivia amuse themselves by planning all manner of improvements in the somewhat gloomy old building, whereby colour and sunlight shall be introduced, and drive away such shadows as linger yet around the walls. Lady Milton is a more popular person than Olivia Marston ever was. Some one said of her that she had never been a girl—that she must have been born a woman, by which, no doubt, was meant to be indicated the indefinable something, which certainly was not hardness, nor boldness, nor self-confidence, but a certain absence of the girlish, blushful element, and the indifference to admiration, which is never quite attractive to men. The composure of her manner befits the young matron charmingly now, so those say who never felt as much at their ease with her formerly as they did with more chaffy, flirty young ladies. However that may be, it was these very qualities, I know, that first attracted Warwick Milton, when everything like women's ordinary

ways, their pretty invitations and seductions of demeanour, were utterly abhorrent to him. No other kind of woman would have been able to work in him, without effort of her own, that revolution which she accomplished. He made his election, and he has not found himself deceived.

Olivia's anxiety about Rupert is now at an end. He never saw Clara after that afternoon when he watched her vanishing, like a wraith, up the stairs, with her dripping locks and drenched garments, and she turned her face towards him for a moment: he never heard from her after that last letter. For nearly two years he abjured all society; he worked harder than ever; he occasionally ran down to the Manor for a few days to see his sister; and then generally avoided the Pomfrets and other neighbours as much as possible. Mary, in the meantime, quite recovered her health and her spirits, but she showed no inclination to fall in love again. Kate was married long since to young Stanridge, and as happy, on the whole, as the generality of people are. But the example did not seem to fire her sister with a desire to go and do likewise. She had several "good" offers, as they are called; she was a very popular girl in London, and scarcely less so in the country; yet after being out four or five years, she still remained unmarried. Her friendship with Lady

Milton was as fast as ever, but Rupert's name seldom passed between them, and except by some rare chance, he and Mary never met.

About two years after Olivia's marriage, however, she began to be apprehensive that her brother's resolute avoidance of society would grow into a fixed habit, which nothing would ever break, unless measures were soon taken to rouse him. "He will become as *sauvage* as you were, Warwick," she said to her husband. "He has had time, now, to recover from the blow. He must not be allowed to brood over it any longer. I wish I could get him to fall in love with Mary."

"What a match-maker you are," said her husband, smiling. "Those things are not to be *got* —as I should have thought you knew by this time."

It ended after a great deal of persuasion, in his going abroad with them for the winter; and at Rome, little by little, they induced him, as Aunt Clo would say, "to mix." More than eighteen months have passed since then; he has risen considerably in the house of Claxton, with a large increase of salary; he no longer avoids society, either in London or the country; he has, during this past summer, been staying three or four times at the Abbey. And now, at last, even as I write

these words, the news reaches me that Olivia's long cherished match-making scheme is actually crowned with success! Not suddenly, as when his passionate gaze first flashed upon Clara Elliston, but by slow degrees, his eyes have been opened to the sweet tender graces of the girl he so long overlooked. The engagement has met with a little opposition from Mrs. Pomfret, who, to use her own expression, "naturally looked higher;" but she always liked Rupert personally, and Mr. Pomfret gave so resolute and cordial a consent at once, that the good lady saw it was useless to say anything more. I am told that she derives considerable comfort from the reflection that several sons of lords have recently entered merchants' houses, and have gone on the Stock Exchange; and though I am afraid in her heart she would have preferred an idle scion of one of those noble families for a son-in-law to the able and industrious man whom Mary has so long loved, yet she wisely makes the best of things; and as she has many good points, in spite of her small vulgarities, I make no doubt but that she and Rupert will get on very well together. People wonder, as they always do in such cases, "why on earth Mr. Marston didn't marry Miss Pomfret long ago, if he meant to do it? They've known each other for years. It's so very odd!" and the world

considers itself aggrieved and defrauded by the discovery that two persons whom it never thought of coupling together—touching whom such a word as "flirtation," even, had never been breathed—suddenly see fit to become man and wife. It is against all rule. If such things are to be tolerated, what is to become of those lynx-eyed guardians of society who watch, retail, and speculate on all our actions?

Mr. Tharpe was seriously ill some time since: it was thought he would die; and there were not wanting people who frankly said that, in their opinion, the world would be well rid of an intolerable nuisance. He disappointed them by recovering. But whether this sickness unto death had softened him, or that his son's unremitting devotion during this long illness produced the effect; or, what is still more probable, that Algy's steady development of a capacity for business soothed the father's irritated vanity, and brought him to think, by degrees, that his son was not such a fool as he had believed; whether either, or a combination, of these wrought the beneficial change in their relations, I know not. Certain it is, that though Mr. Tharpe is still sarcastic at times, though Algy still knocks over more wine glasses and breaks more chairs than any man of my acquaintance, they get on very well together. The affection which

no unkindness has alienated, the sweet temper, the honest, manly nature of the son are worth more, as I think Mr. Tharpe now begins to see, than the brilliant parts of many of the young man's contemporaries.

Julian Westbrook is still unmarried, and very little changed. No retributive fate, in the shape of a termagant wife, as yet befallen him. But he is not a happy man: he is restless, dissatisfied; and as years go on, and the aliment on which his vanity has always fed, is less profusely offered, when the charm of youth and good looks is fading, and the hardness of a selfish nature crops out more and more, I do not think his lot very enviable, though no stern Nemesis has interrupted a prosperous career with any tangible afflictions.

Miss Pringle has *not* established a permanent abiding place for herself at the Manor; but she is very often invited there, when Mr. Harrington and one or two more whist players can come to make up a rubber for her. Warwick is very long-suffering now of the foibles of his wife's aunt. Age, which mellows good wine, and only sours the thin bodiless fruit of the vintage, has softened and ripened my friend's character. He is less impatient of women's weaknesses; more credulous of good in human nature. Of Aunt Clo, for instance, he never forgets that, according to her lights, she

was always kind and fond of Olivia, and he submits to the frivolous old lady with an indulgence which it is marvellous to behold.

It is only left for me to speak of one other person who has played a prominent part in this story. Nothing has been heard of Clara for some time. She is still abroad; "starring" it somewhere in South America, it is supposed. She has had great success in various parts of the world, and is said to have amassed a considerable fortune. There was a rumour at one time that she was going to be married to an Indian prince; and, again, at another, to a rich South American planter. Neither of these reports appear to have been verified; at least, no confirmation of her marriage has ever reached England. Occasionally some paragraph, transcribed from a colonial into one of the London papers, has informed those who still feel an interest in her fate that she has had an "ovation" in such and such a city, where the horses were taken from her carriage, and she was well nigh crushed under the weight of bouquets on the stage. While all this lasts, no doubt she is right: it suits her better than any other sort of life would do. Unfortunately, it cannot last for ever. Even now it may have come to an end; for it is some months since we heard of her. Sooner or later, at all events, the change must come; the

clear voice become unlovely, as a blackbird's at midsummer, the sunny locks grow thin, and the fair face lose its roundness. And then—when the beginning of the end comes—what then?

I like to suggest, at least, some profitable reflection as I write the last page of this story, throughout which but few attempts will be found to improve the occasion, and draw direct lessons from the virtues or backslidings of the persons whom I have written about. Those who demand that such lessons be placed, like sign-posts, before them, pointing out in the finest Roman capitals, whither such and such conduct leads, will ask what moral is herein conveyed. My answer is, there is none. None to those who cannot see that life has its great, unalterable lessons, deeper, broader, more multiform than any which some special fiction or reality appears to illustrate. Each individual existence has within itself a whole world. The further we can penetrate that world, ascending its high places, where the light of heaven shines brightest, and piercing, so far as may be, its intricate depths, the more are we likely to gain in that wisdom, love, and tolerance which grows with the knowledge of our kind. A man may keep all the law and the prophets, and yet be but a poor ensample. On the other hand, we have a Great Authority for believing that, in the secret

heart of publicans and sinners, the graces of charity and humility may grow sometimes more abundantly than in the lives of just immaculate men. It is a very complex skein of black and white, from which the many real stories around us are spun every day. To disentangle with what care I could the various threads in one such story, is the task which I set myself, and which I have but feebly accomplished.

THE END.

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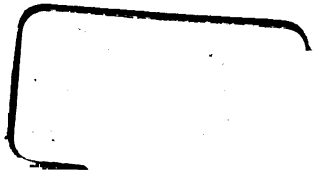
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